



# The Baudin Bicentenary: Celebrating the Differences of Opinion.

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*At the end of May 1801 two French ships, Naturaliste and Geographe, commanded by Nicholas Baudin, sailed into the Bay we now know as Geographe Bay. It was the beginning of a survey of Australian coasts that lasted for two years. The expedition had twin missions — hydrographic survey to produce accurate charts for navigators, and scientific survey of Australia by naturalists, anthropologists, mineralogists and geographers.*

The combination of these aims is a feature of European expeditions to Australia and the Pacific that goes back at least as far as Dampier and de Vlamingh. With the emergence of specialist scientists during the 18<sup>th</sup> century it became possible for the personnel of an expedition to include scientists.

Bougainville's circumnavigation is the first scientific expedition and Cook's first circumnavigation, started a couple of years later, carried a smaller number of scientists, including Joseph Banks.

The logic of combining hydrographic survey with biological survey was unassailable, but there was inevitable conflict between the two objectives. Ship's boats were needed for hydrographic survey, for watering and provisioning, and they would also get used for ferrying scientists to and from the land. Those scientists would not be disciplined in the way that naval personnel could be. Ships needed to be ready to slip or weigh anchor and stand away to sea when necessary, and in the days before walkie-talkies, that could be very difficult with a number of shore parties wandering around an unknown and inhospitable land. Baudin was acutely sensitive to the conflict between hydrography and biology. In his journal for 10 Dec, 1802 he described the departure of a shore party.

*"The large dinghy also set off, carrying the scientists, their knowledge and their baggage, for these gentlemen never move without pomp and magnificence. The cooks with their utensils, the pots the pans and the saucepans, cluttered up the boat so much that not everyone could fit in, and part of the load had to be put in the longboat. All this apparatus so infuriated me that I went back into my cabin, extremely dissatisfied . . ."*

There are widely divergent views about the success or failure of Baudin's expedition and Baudin's role in determining the outcome of the expedition. Baudin died in Mauritius on the return voyage so he was never able to state his case. Francois Péron, the expedition's most prominent scientist, with whom Baudin had a very difficult relationship, took plenty of opportunity to denigrate the deceased commander.

On the one hand Baudin has been seen as a timid navigator, conducting inaccurate "survey by telescope" from much too far off shore. On the other hand, his expedition can be credited with the first accurate survey of Shark Bay,

the first close survey of parts of the southern Australian coast and parts of Tasmania. The chart of Australia published by Louis de Freycinet, who had served on the expedition, can be seen as the first chart to show the entire coastline of Australia in reasonably surveyed outline. Matthew Flinders felt that he was robbed of that claim by the French. In truth neither Freycinet or Flinders could really make the claim. It was Phillip Parker King whose tireless surveying made such a chart possible.

Baudin has been seen as incompetent and given to hasty and rash decisions. He has been characterised as irascible, harsh, and having taken no precautions to prevent scurvy among his crew.

Leslie Marchant, whose "France Australie" is the main source of information about the French survey of western Australia, sees "Baudin's scientific mission [as] the greatest maritime scientific mission of exploration to leave Europe in the age of discovery by sail . . ."

It is said that the Baudin expedition brought to Europe more biological specimens than any other expedition (though no authority for this is cited). But what of the quality of specimens? If we can believe Baudin himself, a significant part of the specimens were broken shells shovelled up from the beach by sailors who were bribed to collect them by scientists offering rum.

The critical question when assessing the French part in the development of the scientific maritime expedition is whether the French preference for organising on a grand scale led to greater results than the relatively parsimonious British approach? Baudin himself was quite clear about that. "*If . . . attention had been paid to the observations I made likewise on the uselessness of embarking so many scientists for a voyage upon which half the present number would still be too many, then, perhaps, the personalities might have been better suited and I should have had fewer worries.*" Baudin's Journal, Santa Cruz, Canary Islands, Nov. 1800.

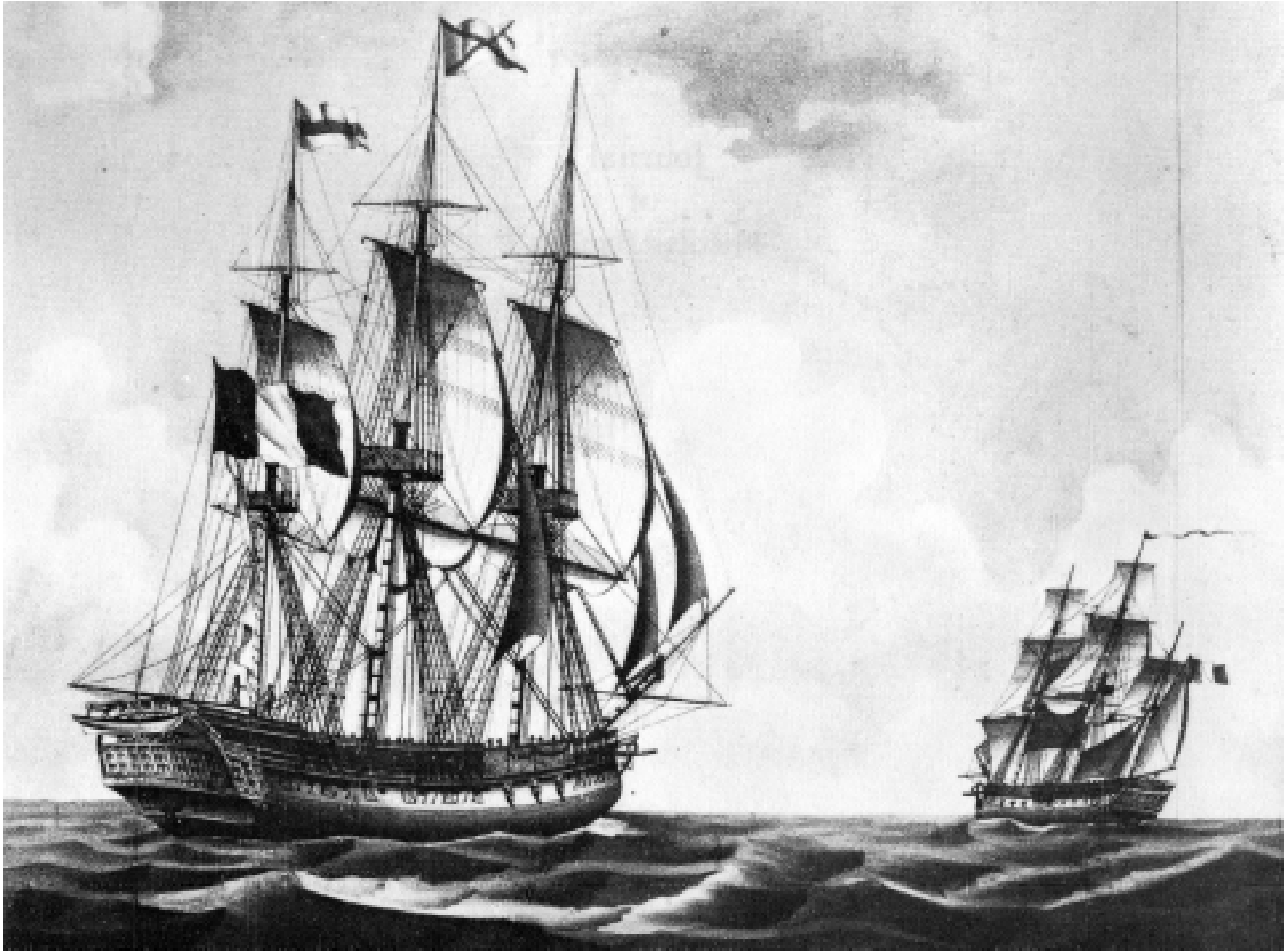
## **Baudin's career before 1800**

Born 1754, Ile de Re, off Rochelle. Or was he? Another source gives 17/2/1756 as his date of birth.

Baudin was a noted navigator. He led expeditions of scientific survey to the West Indies and to the Indian Ocean. Very little has been published about those expeditions but they were successful and Baudin's reputation was made by those expeditions.

In 1798 the Paris newspaper *Moniteur* said the collections brought to France by Baudin's expeditions were "the richest and most beautiful collection of plants [and animals] ever brought to Europe. . ." (Translated and quoted in Kelly, M., 1965)

Jussieu, a prominent French politician or statesman wrote "Of all travellers [Baudin] is the one whose achievements



*Geographe setting only topsails and staysails could easily keep pace with Naturaliste under all plain sail.*

in the sphere of natural history are the most conspicuous.” (Translated and quoted in Kelly, M., 1965)

Baudin himself had proposed and promoted a scientific circumnavigation to emulate Cook’s (and to counter the failure of Laperouse’s expedition).

He was in his mid- to late-forties when he led the *Geographe* and *Naturaliste* expedition.

#### **Baudin’s Performance in the 1800-1803 Expedition.**

Baudin’s overall performance is difficult to be certain about because the assessment hinges on the competence or incompetence of the officers serving under him. At times, Baudin seemed to be an ineffectual commander and his journal is obnoxiously self-serving. One suspects that his officers might have been performing poorly because they were exasperated by his vacillation, irritability, and arrogance. At other times Baudin seems to be reasonable and competent, and his officers seem just the opposite. A basic question is whether Baudin was really the main problem, as some authorities imply, or was Baudin a good commander struggling to conduct an overblown voyage of exploration while served by callow and lazy officers whom he dared not trust?

7th July, 1803, Baudin, dying of tuberculosis, had been spitting blood for three months. He was worn down, his intention to work eastwards along the north coast of Australia was thwarted by the strong southeast trade winds. Finally he decided to give up the unequal battle and run for

Ile de France (Mauritius). Regarding that decision, which must have been a huge relief for most of the ship’s company, Baudin made a very curious entry in his journal.

*“I leave to be imagined the effect that this change of course had, for no one was expecting [it]. Throughout the whole voyage, no one has ever known where I was going or what I wanted to do.”* Someone else has added at that point in the journal *“nor what I was doing”*.

Baudin obviously didn’t much confide in his officers or anyone else.

Sometimes Baudin seems to have been unreasonable. He seems on occasions to have sailed away and left behind Hamelin, and later Freycinet in *Casuarina*, when the ships separated. During the voyage down the Atlantic, Baudin was understandably irritated by the poor performance of *Naturaliste*. He told Hamelin that he should signal when he required *Geographe* to wait for *Naturaliste*. This was putting the onus on his subordinate and it makes little sense because when *Geographe* was too far ahead, Hamelin wouldn’t be able to signal. It was properly up to the faster vessel’s commander to maintain company with the slower vessel. Hamelin seems to have ignored the instruction and to have been disinclined to show his position at night. Baudin became more and more aggravated and eventually, in his journal, accused Hamelin of not showing a light in order to sneak ahead at night! Hamelin was presumably doing his best to keep up in his inferior ship. He was obliged to carry



more canvas than Baudin which must have made for anxious sailing in squally weather.

It has been proposed that the revolutionary French Navy had too few competent officers because many officers with aristocratic background or sympathies were purged or migrated during The Terror. There is also the idea that Revolutionary philosophy undermined the strict Naval hierarchy of authority that had been previously in place. Baudin seems to have been unable to effectively discipline his officers. They seem to have been lazy and spoilt. For example, they seem to have taken it as their right to eat very much more of the attractive constituents of the provisions than the seamen. They apparently complained that they could not survive on crew's provisions alone, yet they did not buy their own provisions.

31<sup>st</sup> December, 1801 *“At about ten o'clock Mr Freycinet, the staff-sergeant, came and told me that it was impossible for the officers to live on the ordinary ration that the regulations prescribe for everyone. According to the calculation that he showed me, they had eaten in a decade [ten days] all that they were allowed for a month. I told Mr Freycinet what difficulties he would place us in if they continued at this rate, saying that in six months, the officer's table alone would have consumed all the rations that are on board. I added that my duty made it imperative to take as much care of the sailors, who did exhausting labour, as of the officers, who appeared on deck for just four hours each day.”*

Baudin, in his journal continues for a paragraph or two showing that the officers have been consuming provisions in a completely intemperate and irresponsible way. The comment that they only appear on deck for four hours each day is worth noting. Elsewhere Baudin complains that even in storms and dangerous situations, the officers never appear on deck except during their watch. Baudin himself was standing two or three watches at times and stayed on deck, without sleep, for very long periods during times of duress.

A particularly repugnant example of the officer's greed is given when there are only ten pounds of tea left. Four pounds is reserved for the sick, then the officers take half the remainder with the other half for the much larger number of sailors. As Baudin points out, they could easily have laid in their own supply rather than taking what had been bought for the sailors.

Some officers took apartments ashore in Mauritius and neglected most of their duties. Clearly some officers deserted in Mauritius. Baudin does not seem troubled by that and does not name the deserters in his journal.

The officers were often delinquent when in charge of shore parties such as expeditions for collecting water. They tend to go off hunting, using the ammunition they were issued for defence of the shore party.

16 Jan, 1802 *“The day before, there had been little order amongst the men who went fishing. The moment they landed, each one wandered off without permission and wherever his fancy took him.”*

25 Jan, 1802. Baudin decided that men and officers in shore parties will not be issued with guns since they wandered away shooting things. He notes that *“Hamelin has*

*already introduced this measure”*, suggesting that the officers really were pretty irresponsible.

31 Jan, 1802 The officers, almost without exception, had made such a poor job of organising watering that Baudin entrusted the watering party to the command of the longboat “skipper” (boatswain?) who did a much better job.

28<sup>th</sup> April, 1802 Surveying the South Australian coast (without *Naturaliste*), scurvy and other health problems reduced the active crew to about thirty men. There were not enough helmsmen, Freycinet asked for authorisation to order the master carpenter and second caulker to steer. Baudin replied that an authorisation for an order was hardly necessary — a polite request to the men would do. He then went on to decide that his officers and midshipmen would steer for one-and-a-half hours each when on watch. The officers and midshipmen were apparently scandalised. Some fainted sickness, Bougainville simply refused to steer. Baudin may have been somewhat provocative in telling his officers to steer, but their refusal to comply in such circumstances does them no credit and makes one wonder whether they actually had any expertise in steering.

24<sup>th</sup> January 1803 Baudin was having a replacement chalupe built (for the second time). Baudin himself, with his steward Boivin, set to work ripping planks for the new boat. Ronsard took a turn on the saw, *“but the other officers were careful not to show up. Although not one of them knows the first thing about ship [boat] building, they have not gone near the chalupe since it has been on the stocks. Work, they say, is for the populace; a naval officer should only know how to guide a ship and to rest when his watch is finished.”*

1<sup>st</sup> Jan 1803 provides a clear example of dereliction of duty by an unnamed officer. His instructions were to sound every hour during the night and to report if they came into soundings. At ten o'clock they found bottom at thirty three fathoms but did not report to Baudin. However, Baudin heard the report called out by the man sounding and so tacked the ship. On that particular coast (south coast, Kangaroo Island) Baudin believed or knew that being in soundings indicated the coast was already fairly close on board.

17<sup>th</sup> June, 1803. They had been anchored in light conditions, but around midnight a southeasterly gale came up and they dragged anchor. The bell was rung to summon all hands. *“not one officer appeared on deck and the only persons present [other than seamen] were Midshipman Baudin [no relation to Comander Baudin] and Brévedent.”*

Baudin appears to have had respect for Hamelin.

6<sup>th</sup> Dec. 1802. East of King Island Baudin signalled Hamelin to take advantage of an easterly and make for France. *“This moment of separation was extremely painful for me and I felt a pang that obliged me to seek my cabin. I was truly fond of Captain Hamelin for his personal qualities . . .”*

Baudin had a strong sense of propriety and was offended by lack of propriety in others. Freycinet is described by Baudin, at Santa Cruz, as much too young for his rank. This was not Louis-Claude, but his brother Henri de Freycinet, who had apparently got into disreputable company in Santa Cruz and returned aboard to dine with four boon companions, including one Frenchman who Baudin obviously re-



garded as most unsuitable company. Baudin was angry at having been obliged to spend a little time at table with the man and reprimanded young Freycinet.

After leaving Santa Cruz, the Chief steward complained that Henri had threatened him with violence. Baudin says that he spoke to Freycinet, and adds that he had judged the young man to be a problem in Le Harve.

Both Freycinet brothers managed to offend Baudin: 22<sup>nd</sup> Nov 1801, becalmed, Baudin sent a boat to *Naturaliste* with some meat and a message for Hamelin. The boat returned with two men from *Naturaliste*, one of them an officer, namely Freycinet, who did not present himself to Baudin. Baudin was very angry and wrote Hamelin telling him to have Freycinet locked in his cabin for two days.

### **Baudin and Louis de Freycinet**

The *Australian Dictionary of Biography* says Baudin and Freycinet, Louise-Claud (1779–1842) “worked together as cartographic surveyors and naturalists.” Did they work together? Baudin has been accused of sailing away leaving Freycinet in *Casuarina* to survey, having given him insufficient time for the task.

*Casuarina*, with Freycinet in command, set out on 11<sup>th</sup> January 1803, with instructions to be away for no more than twenty days. He was to survey the northern ends and western shores of both the Spencer Gulf and the Gulf of St Vincent. On 25<sup>th</sup> he had been away for 14 days and Baudin wrote he would only wait another 4 days. He did however wait the full 20 days. As he sailed away, *Casuarina* was sighted, but she did not tack to approach *Geographe*, rather she continued to stand for the anchorage on Kangaroo island. Freycinet sailed from there to Albany without making an effort to join *Geographe* at Nuyts Archipelago.

Not long after sailing from Albany, Baudin sent Freycinet inshore to investigate a possible opening to a bay, with instructions to look and come straight back. Three days later there was still no sign of Freycinet returning and Baudin was very angry, contemplating relieving Freycinet of his command if they met again.

They did meet again at the designated rendezvous at Rottneest. Freycinet explained that he only spent five hours looking at the opening and then stood straight back out to sea where he was astonished at not finding *Geographe*. Baudin put this down to hazy conditions and did not upbraid Freycinet, commenting that the explanation “seemed fairly reasonable to me.”

At times, Freycinet does seem to have been lazy as skipper of *Casuarina*. He did not supervise the cutting of firewood for his ship at King George Sound, so the sailors detailed to do it wandered off fishing and relaxing. But perhaps that was Freycinet’s intention. Freycinet claimed to need new supplies of firewood and in the end Baudin supervised the cutting of firewood, but when the firewood was taken to *Casuarina* she was found to be already so full of the stuff that not all the crew could sleep below. While Baudin had been peevishly supervising firewood cutting, Péron and Taillefer were having a heavy lunch hosted by Freycinet on board *Casuarina*. Baudin was increasingly angry with Freycinet, who did seem to be dragging the chain with provisioning and preparations to sail from Albany.

While sailing to Mauritius, *Casuarina* carried away the main boom gooseneck or jaws. Freycinet came close to *Geographe* and reported the problem, saying that he could no longer set the mainsail. Baudin sent a carpenter to make the repair and commented on the lack of resource Freycinet demonstrated in not fixing it himself.

Baudin gave Freycinet written instructions regarding rendezvous instructions should the ships become separated, which contain harsh criticism. He says the cost of equipping *Casuarina* has become “burdensome to the government and pointless for the expedition.” However, the criticism was written, not spoken, in instructions to be opened at sea, so that the criticism wouldn’t be overheard. He also gave Freycinet a letter for the authorities in Ile de France in case *Casuarina* was unable to rendezvous with *Geographe*, and that letter is more temperate and would not have been prejudicial to Freycinet’s reputation had he need to use it.

### **Baudin’s Mistakes**

Baudin was not incapable of admitting mistakes. For example, on 31<sup>st</sup> December, 1802, the lookouts reported sighting land away “West by South-West” [sic] where land had not been expected. “When the position of the reported land was indicated, everyone thought he recognised it and I made the same mistake as all the others, for I was convinced (and for longer even than they were) that it as a coastline.” Baudin goes on to say in some detail how they spent considerable time steering for this chimera created by a bank of clouds.

On 24<sup>th</sup> May 1802, also on the Tasmanian coast, Baudin was surprised that he did not recognise a cape and surrounding coast that they had sailed past earlier in the year. He was the only person not to recognise the coast. In fact Baudin had been sick, in bed, when they had previously been there. “This mistake on my part pleased more than one person on board and did much to persuade each that he was more fit to manage the ship than I was.”

It is just possible that the mistake was disingenuous on Baudin’s part — he spent the next ten days trying to survey that coast in stormy conditions, apparently to chasten his officers who had neglected to survey the coast when he had been sick in bed (and they had been searching for a missing boat). By that time, May 1802, he had only twenty healthy seamen and he should have been running for Sydney.

24<sup>th</sup> March, 1803, Baudin thought that they had sailed over the longitude that Bernier had previously fixed for Northwest Cape without seeing land. He sent for Bernier and asked for an explanation. Bernier replied that if the correction for the chronometer error was applied, the longitude given to the Cape was correct. “I had nothing to say to this reply, and recognised my error.”

Some accusations of errors levelled against Baudin are based on misunderstandings. It is said that Baudin did not follow any anti-scorbutic precautions, but that is not entirely true since, on occasions native “celery” was collected to make soup. Cook did the same. Baudin did issue lemon juice cut with water and syrup in particularly hot weather and felt the need of it himself (1<sup>st</sup> April, 1803). More to the point, Baudin did not understand the cause and cure of scurvy, and he cannot be blamed for it, because his medical officer, Lharidon,



did not understand the cause and cure either. Humidity was seen as part of the problem. Salt provisions were also suspected and Baudin thought that fresh fish would help the afflicted. This is a persistence of the problem of medical science disregarding and rejecting well-known “folk cures” for scurvy — eating greens such as scurvy grass, as well as citrus fruit, had long been known to cure scurvy, but that kind of cure provided no opening for medical science.

Baudin made a very slow passage from the Canaries to Mauritius. It has been said that this was because he followed the African coast rather than taking the sailing ship route closer to the Brazilian coast. That’s simply not true. He sailed somewhat west of south down the African coast from the Canaries to Cape Verde but once he picked up the southeast trades he sagged away to the South American coast in the usual way. It was southern summer and the southeast trades were not consistent.

Marchant sees Baudin as aimlessly sailing around Geographe Bay for four days, anchoring at night and running out to sea during the day to capriciously prevent the scientists from going ashore. In fact he was beating into the southeastern corner of the Bay during hours of day light and sometimes making ground during the early hours of the night too. Had he been more confident of his officers’ surveying capabilities and industry he might have anchored further out in the bay and surveyed from the ship’s boats.

Once he had beat up to the coast near Capel he anchored and allowed shore parties to go ashore on 4<sup>th</sup> June.

It could be argued that the events of the next few days prejudiced Baudin’s opinion of his officers and left him reluctant to close with the coast in the way necessary for hydrographic survey.

Baudin had intended to sail again on 5<sup>th</sup>. But Heirisson from *Naturaliste* had reported finding a river (Wonerup Estuary) which required further investigation. So Baudin sent Hamelin ashore in one of his boats with Heirisson, and sent his own long boat with Le Bas (Baudin’s 2IC) in command.

The weather got windy and the wind went round to NNE. The long boat did not return. The following day Baudin did not know what was happening on shore — why his long boat had not returned. He sat stewing on *Geographe*. He surmised that Le Bas had been inveigled by the scientist into staying ashore overnight in contravention of orders.

*“Working on this conviction, I vowed and declared that such a thing should not happen again. And whether these gentlemen will in future be satisfied or not, they shall not go ashore again, except when the ship is no longer in danger of being driven out to sea and they do not run the risk of being dismissed on a lonely, unknown shore.”*

Eventually Baudin learned from Hamelin, who had managed to get back to the ships, about the problems on shore where Baudin’s longboat or *chaloupe* had been wrecked, and together they made plans for a rescue on the following day.

At dawn on 7<sup>th</sup> June it was very windy. So they could not send boats ashore at dawn as they had planned. Hamelin had instruction to take *Naturaliste* in close to the beach where the long boat was wrecked. However, Hamelin had trouble with his anchor handling gear and could not weigh, so *Geographe* weighed and Baudin took her in close, sailing along the shore in 6–7 fathoms, and anchoring at midday in

7 fathoms. From the ship they could see no sign of any Europeans on the beach and they feared the worst. Baudin went to his cabin and cried.

The shore party were in fact huddled behind the dunes. Eventually they looked out to sea and signalled to the ship.

A boat was sent towards the beach, but it could not land. They carried a hawser to be sent in through the surf to pull people off beach. The boat returned at 9:00 p.m. *“bringing only citizen Péron, who was more dead than alive.”* He had had to swim out to the boat.

Le Bas had not allowed the rest of the scientists to leave, saying that he needed them to help refloat the long boat, but Baudin suspected that he wanted the numbers ashore to impress the Aborigines who might be considering an attack.

On the morning of 8<sup>th</sup> June, Baudin sent a boat again with the carpenter to inspect the long boat. He also sent jacks and other equipment requested by Le Bas for salvaging the long boat. Hamelin was also instructed to send a boat. Baudin sent a letter to Le Bas telling him to get everyone back on board; to abandon the long boat if necessary; to no longer endanger the ships which were precariously anchored in threatening weather on a lee shore.

All the naturalists, who had waded out, “up to their necks”, were re-embarked at 2:00 p.m.

Le Bas and Ronsard were anxious to salve the long boat but it was hopeless.

At 4:00 p.m. the men were brought off in the two boats, but the boats were heavily loaded and they necessarily left behind all the gear, including jacks, sent to salvage the longboat.

Le Bas apologised to Baudin. He was evidently in a bad way. *“I listened to him without replying, for his condition did not permit of my upbraiding him as he deserved.”*

The carpenter reported that the long boat was embedded in the sand below low water and impossible to salve except in ideal weather conditions.

*Naturaliste* still had two boats ashore at nightfall. They returned at 8:00 p.m. and Baudin sent word to sail immediately because of the threatening weather.

They beat around during the night, close to the southern shore of Geographe Bay and continued to do the same the next day. In the evening, in very bad weather, Baudin stood out to sea, losing contact with *Naturaliste*. Hamelin continued to beat around Geographe Bay, unable to get clear, for *Naturaliste* was much less weatherly than *Geographe*. He then sailed to the appointed rendezvous in Gage Roads, and while there surveyed Rottnest, Cockburn Sound and sent Heirisson and Moreau up the Swan River. Most people in Perth know the island named for Heirisson, but the Mews named for Moreau in Applecross is less familiar.

Baudin sailed past the rendezvous point and did not remain long in the second rendezvous at Shark Bay. He continued up the coast barely sighting more than off-shore islets before heading to Timor for provisions. Hamelin reached Timor a month later having made an accurate survey of Shark Bay.

Baudin can certainly be seen as a flawed character, but his journal contains some fine sardonic humour, and for that reason I like him.