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THE BAUDIN MEDALS OF KING GEORGE SOUND, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

by Peter Lane

INTRODUCTION

The French explorer Nicholas Baudin is known to have distributed medals at only one location in Australia, King George Sound, in the South West corner of the continent. His expedition, 1801 - 1803, predates the time England claimed sovereignty of that territory. Why did Baudin leave medals there and nowhere else in Australia? Was it just coincidental or was there a motive? This essay examines the political background of Australia at the time and attempts to answer the possible motives for leaving medals there.

At the time of the Baudin Expedition, Europe was fascinated with exotic animals, birds and plants from the antipodes, and despite the political upheaval at the time, the French mounted an official scientific expedition to Australia to collect specimens. Souvenir medals were struck in those days in France to celebrate major events, and this expedition was no exception.

That same year, 1800, a medal was struck at the Dresden mint in the independent Electorate of Saxony, alluding to the importance of Australia's natural science. This piece, engraved by C. J. Krueger is known as "The New Century 1800 Medal" reflects the European interest in Australia at that time.

The French expedition's medal is now referred to as the Baudin Medal and was distributed in France and Australia. The medals did not appear on the official list of cargo as they were probably intended for distribution only in France as souvenirs. As Baudin was commander of the expedition, he was given some, and he handed them out when he considered it appropriate.

The expedition was granted a neutrality status by England and distributing medals in the British Colony of New South Wales to aborigines may have been seen as a prelude



Obverse: Above, DIE BESTE LEHRERIN (The Best Teacher), angel on right holding parchment ERFAHRUNG (Discovery), parchment below AUSTRALIEN (Australia), in exergue the engravers name C.I. KRUGER. F.



Reverse: Above, DAS SCHEIDENDE JAHRHUNDERT (The Turn of the Century) on globe SACHSEN BOEHM BRAND (Saxony Bohemia Brandenburg), below 1800

to annexation of British Territory by France. A number of explorers in those times distributed medals to natives of new found lands and the pieces always depicted the head of state. The medals were more than just trinkets, they served a political purpose. They were intended to help bond the two peoples together and inform other Europeans that another nation had been there before them. Not quite a claim on the territory in a European sense, but a step towards it.

British Territory in Australia gradually absorbed the whole of the continent and this expansion was based on European conventions. During Cook's first Voyage of Discovery, he only claimed the coastal strip from Pt. Hicks near the NSW-Victorian border to the top of Cape York in Queensland. He did this by raising the flag at Possession Island near the northern point of Cape York. When Governor Arthur Phillip arrived in Australia in 1788 with the First Fleet he immediately expanded NSW, west to the 135th Degree East Meridian, just east of Darwin. This meridian was the line of demarcation between Portugal and Spain. Those two nations formerly divided the non-Christian world up between themselves under various treaties. The last treaty, signed at Saragossa in 1525 gave Spain the eastern half of Australia and west of the 135th degree to the Portuguese; however it is likely that neither country knew if this part of the world was land or sea.

From 1580 to 1668 the two Iberian nations were united and during this period the Dutch took possession by force of most of the territories in the East Indies that belonged to Portugal. The Dutch, and later the English and French, argued that as they were not a party of the Saragossa Treaty, it did not apply to them. Just prior to Governor Phillip sailing to NSW the English Government was negotiating a triple alliance with Prussia and Holland which came into being in 1788. The English did not want to offend Holland, Portugal's legatee, over New Holland, despite its lack of interest in it.

Governor Phillip also claimed all the land to the south including Tasmania, then thought to be part of the main land, thus ignoring the Dutch claim to Tasmania. In 1642 Abel Tasman, the Dutch explorer, raised a flag and took the land for his country and named it Van Diemen's Land after the Governor of the East Indies.

The English assumed the Dutch had no use for it as a trading centre and it was well outside their sphere in the East Indies, and it was of great strategic importance to the British Empire.

No other Europeans visited the island until the French in 1773 who simply replenished supplies of wood and water for their ship. The following year Captain Furneaux, officer-in-charge of Captain Cook's second ship the *ADVENTURE*, during Cook's Second Voyage of Discovery, left specially made medals depicting King George III there. Four years later Cook himself distributed identical medals to the Tasmanian Aborigines during his last and fateful Voyage of Discovery. These Cook medals are known as *Resolution and Adventure Medals* and they were also distributed throughout the Pacific Islands including New Zealand, and many of the islands where they were left later became British Colonies.

During the first half of the 17th. century the Dutch had discovered and charted the western half of Australia. They did not claim the land but simply named the coast, and the continent, New Holland. The south western corner of the continent where Baudin distributed his medals was named Land van de Leeuwin after its discoverer in 1622. In 1794 the French Revolutionary Army conquered Holland (United Provinces) and it became a puppet state (The Batavian Republic 1795-1806), and during Baudin's voyage it was an ally of France, but this was a fragile alliance. Therefore Baudin would have been very mindful not to create a diplomatic incident .

In 1772, just two years after Cook claimed the east coast, Saint Allouarn, the French

explorer, whilst at Shark Bay on the west coast, annexed all the land to the north for his country. He recorded this event on parchment and placed it together with two six-sol coins in a bottle which they buried. The whereabouts of the bottle and contents remains a mystery. Surprisingly, later French maps still used the Dutch names and did not record the annexation.

Western Australia was claimed for England in 1791 by the explorer, George Vancouver, whilst he was in King George Sound. His journal records, "The British colours were displayed, and having drunk His Majesty's health, we took possession of the country." However the British Government never recognised Vancouver's annexation as he had no authority to do so.

CAPTAIN BAUDIN

Thomas Nicolas Baudin was born in 1756 at Saint-Martin De Re in Brittany. His father, Francois, was a merchant and later became a Chandler for a lighthouse. At the age of 21 Baudin joined the French East India Company and within a short time he resigned and returned to France.

He commenced a naval career during the American War of Independence and remained in the French Navy until being relieved of command by an officer of noble birth. Baudin then transferred to the Austrian Navy and at that time the Emperor was Joseph, a brother of the Queen of France. His patron, Emperor Joseph, wished to acquire plants for a botanical garden at Schonbrunn and Baudin made successful expeditions in 1786 and 1792 to the Indian and Pacific Oceans to collect plants. Baudin later undertook an expedition to the West Indies to collect botanical specimens for France. Due to his reputation amongst scientists he was able to successfully convince the Institut National and the First Consul of France, Napoleon Bonaparte, for a scientific "Voyage aux Terres Australes." and he received the commission to command it on 25th. March, 1800.

THE BAUDIN MEDAL

The 38 millimetre medal depicts Napoleon Bonaparte and has an appropriate inscription relating to the expedition and uses the French Republican Calendar year, AN.9 (Sailed in



OBVERSE: BONAPARTE PREMIER CONSUL DE LA REP. FRANCE. around, and below EXPEDITION DE/ DECOUVERTES/AN. 9. On the truncation the engravers mark: MONTAG



REVERSE: The inscription in six lines: LES CORVETTES/LE GEOGRAPHE ET/LE NATURALISTE,/COMMANDEES PAR/LE CAPITAINE/BAUDIN with a scroll below. The first die has the C in CAPITAINE above the A in BAUDIN, and the second die has the C above the B in BAUDIN.

1800 AD). Regrettably it does not have a mint mark to show where it was struck, but it was minted in Paris. The die engraver was Pierre Antoine Montagny who was an active medalist from 1790 to 1816 and signed his work in the following styles, PAM, P.A. MONTAGNY F, and MONTAG. For this medal he used the latter style in minute letters on the portrait side. The medal has one obverse type and two reverses, one of the latter side's die appears to have totally disintegrated which suggests that to complete the production run another die had to be made; in fact all three dies eventually cracked during minting. As the medal is now relatively hard to come by it would appear that the mintage was low compared to other medals of the day, and it is known in silver, gilt, bronze and white metal. The two main reference numbers used for the Baudin Medal are; M.H. 174. (Milford Haven) and Bransen 1,72.

THE SHIPS, CREWS AND CARGOES.

Two corvettes were used for the expedition, the *GEOGRAPHE* and the *NATURALISTE*. The *GEOGRAPHE* was the flag ship of the voyage and was 37.6 metres long, 9.1 wide, and had a draft of 4.4 The *NATURALISTE* was 0.9 metres longer but 0.9 narrower and its draft was 0.5 less which made it more practical for surveying coast lines.

Citizen Nicolas Baudin sailed on the *GEOGRAPHE*, and the ship's commander was Sainte Croix Le Bas. One hundred and twenty four officers, sailors, and scientists signed on. The cargo comprised 23 cases for plant, zoology and botany purposes, 29 cases of miscellaneous articles including Cook's Voyages and other exploration books. Barter items filled 15 boxes and included ribbons, combs, laces, earrings, scissors, mirrors, terra cotta busts and buttons.

The corvette *NATURALISTE* was commanded by Js. Felix Eml. Hamelin and its compliment of crew and scientists totalled nine more than the *GEOGRAPHE*. Its cargo also contained scientific and barter items and had only 18 cases less than the flag ship and

therefore was probably just as crowded for the crew.

THE VOYAGE

The two ships sailed from Le Havre in northern France on the 19th of October, 1800 after having failed the day before due to the lack of wind. The French Republican Calendar for the date that they sailed was the 27 Vendemiaire, Year 9. At that time England was at war with France and the English had a frigate blockading the port. Baudin went on board the *PROSELYTE* and gave the English captain his passport from the English Admiralty to read and the Captain later boarded the *GEOGRAPHE*. Baudin wrote in his journal "Upon his departure, I begged him to accept a medal struck to commemorate the voyage, which he did with pleasure, and then we parted." They then sailed for Teneriffe in the Canary Islands and on to Mauritius, then named Isle-de-France, bypassing the Cape of Good Hope. During their stay at Mauritius twenty four scientists and ten marine officers deserted the expedition.

On the 27th of March, 1801 they sighted Cape Leeuwin in the south west corner of the coast of New Holland and after a few days sailing north they found a suitable place to anchor. One party that rowed ashore met an aborigine and offered him "several necklaces of glass beads" but the aborigine did not want to have anything to do with them and ran away. Whilst they were unable to personally give him gifts, they left behind "a bottle, a necklace of glass beads, a little biscuit, a nail and a few other trifles" for him and other members of his tribe.

The expedition then continued to sail north and when they arrived at Shark Bay they were able to land and collect specimens for their collection but did not sight any aborigines. Baudin continued northwards charting the coast until the 23rd July, 1801 before heading for Timor to replenish supplies. They remained in Timor for just under three months before sailing to Tasmania, then known as Van Diemen's Land.

They sighted the coast of Tasmania on the 13th of January, 1802 and remained in its waters until the 27th of February. Baudin and his men went ashore on a number of occasions and met several tribes of aborigines to whom they gave gifts. Fortunately for us these meetings were recorded in detail by Baudin in his Journal, and whilst they do not mention "medals" they are of numismatic importance. They also play an important role in the main theory of this paper and as such it is appropriate to mention them here. They are as follows:

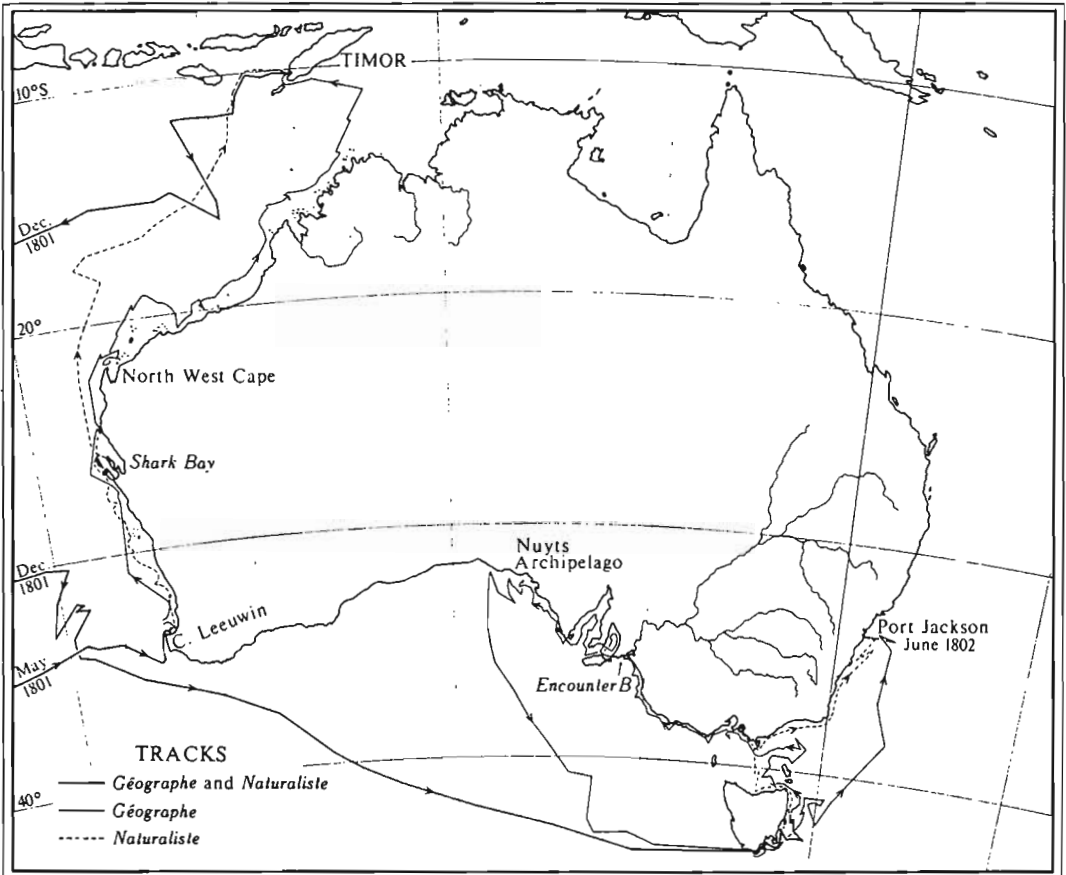
"Citizen Bonnefoi (an officer) gave a woman a small mirror in return for her necklace. The locket consisted of an English penny and a metal button, but nobody could discover when she acquired them." The lock-

et would have been given to her by English Captains, Furneaux, Cook, Bligh, or Lieut. Hayes, or their men, all of whom had visited Tasmania before Baudin. Alternatively it was passed on to her by someone who was given it by one of the English explorers.

"They showed a great desire to have the bottles ... with a little rum (they emptied the contents out on the ground and they were) ... full of delight at owning the containers."

"With everyone sitting down again they turned their attention (to the buttons on their waistcoats) ... Some were cut off and distributed amongst them to their great satisfaction."

"I gave him some glass beads which he examined happily. His companions seeing



Baudin Expedition. Track Chart 1801 - 1803.

what went on, were not slow in joining us and were likewise well received.”

“Captain Hamelin wanted to exchange something for one of their spears. He proposed a deal by signs well understood, and it was agreed that they would hand over a spear in return for a uniform button.”

During their sojourn at Bruny Island, where Captain Cook had distributed Resolution and Adventure Medals about a quarter of a century earlier, Captain Hamelin and Baudin swapped buttons for spears. The exchange rate was “one spear (for) a button stamped with an anchor. The deal was carried out in good faith and no unfair play.”

The next leg of the voyage was to chart the unknown southern coast of mainland Australia from Wilson’s Promontory near Melbourne to St. Peter and St. Francis Islands on the far west coast of South Australia.

Whilst off Wilson’s Promontory the commander of the *NATURALISTE* decided to abandon plans to sail west and headed for Sydney because the ship was short of supplies and some of the crew were sick. Baudin continued to sail west and at Encounter Bay, near the mouth of the River Murray, he saw the *INVESTIGATOR*, sailing in the opposite direction, and welcomed aboard its commander, Captain Flinders. The two freely exchanged information on the areas they had explored in Australia. Both explorers missed the Murray mouth, Australia’s most important river.

Had Baudin spent a few weeks less in Tasmania he would have been honoured for discovering the whole unknown southern coast that was later named by the French as *Terre Napoleon*. To make matters even worse he learnt in Sydney that the coast from approximately the South Australian - Victorian border to Wilson’s Promontory was discovered by Captain Grant in the English Brig the *LADY NELSON* only a very short time before. Thus Baudin only discovered the coast from approximately the Victorian border to the Murray mouth. Baudin then continued to sail west and chart the coast for a

month, before sailing to Sydney via the southern coast of Tasmania, despite the fact that he knew the direct route through Bass Strait.

In Sydney he was warmly welcomed by Governor King who willingly gave him all the supplies he needed, except for salt-meat that was unavailable in the colony. Baudin even purchased a schooner of 30 tons, which the French named *CASUARINA* (she-oak) because of the timber used in its construction. In port was Baudin’s second ship, which had arrived months earlier. Regrettably no entries are made in Baudin’s Journal during his time in Sydney, however we do know that the scientists collected many plants there. The captain made friends with the Governor and dined with Flinders on board the *INVESTIGATOR*, such was their friendship.

Baudin then returned to Bass Strait to undertake further investigations of the geography and oceanography of the Strait. Despite the French commander’s assurances to the Governor of New South Wales that the expedition was purely scientific and its purpose had no ulterior motive, rumours soon spread that the French had plans of setting up a colony somewhere in Bass Strait.

On the basis of these rumours, the Governor sent acting Lieutenant Charles Robbins in the *CUMBERLAND* to Bass Strait to inform Baudin tactfully that the territory belonged to England. He did meet up with the French on King Island, but he did not tactfully inform them that they were on English soil. He raised the Flag in the vicinity of the French scientists’ tents and fired a volley, followed by three cheers! Baudin wrote a private letter to King stating how hurt he was, after telling him that the French had no intentions of annexing Van Diemen’s Land (Tasmania) or adjacent islands.

After completing the work in the Strait, the *NATURALISTE* sailed for France, via Mauritius, laden with plants. The corvette arrived back at Le Havre on the 7th of June, 1803 after being held captive for a few days by the English at Portsmouth. The French had

heard stories that the expedition was a failure and they were more concerned about the war in Europe. Thus the ship received little interest upon its return.

The other two ships sailed for Kangaroo Island, near Encounter Bay where the commander first met Flinders. Whilst there, some of the crew engraved a rock recording their stay there. Incidentally this rock has been removed to the Mortlock Library, in Adelaide.

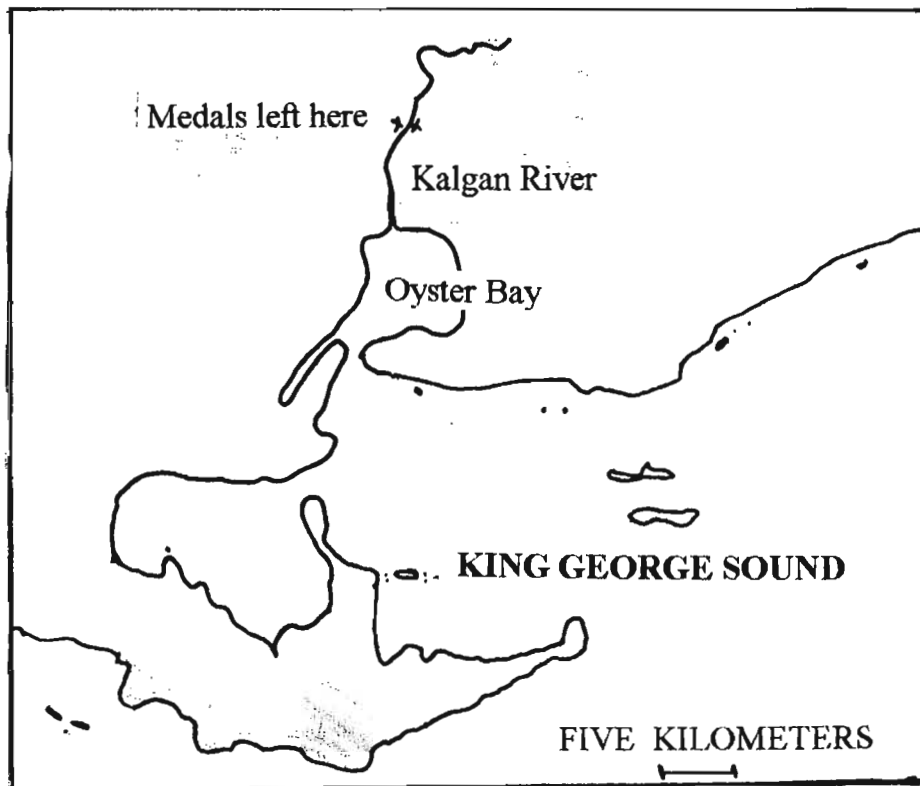
KING GEORGE SOUND

Baudin's next call was King George Sound, on the southern coast of New Holland (Western Australia). As mentioned earlier, this land was outside English territory, and it was here he left medals. The *GEOGRAPHE* arrived on the 18th of February 1803, and the *CASUARINA* was already waiting for her.

On the 22nd of February, Baudin wrote in his journal "While exploring the environs of

Riviere des Francais (now known as Kalgan River, some 10 kilometers inland from Oyster Bay)... we found two rather peculiar and interesting monuments erected by the natives... The first was two or three meters from the stream, on a piece of bare ground that was one meter in circumference and surrounded by finely tapered spears painted red at the tip. There were eleven in all. Parallel with this trophy, on the other side of this stream, (was a virtually identical scene). Several people thought that the spears had been painted with red blood, (in fact it was eucalyptus resin)." Baudin speculated what he had found were two warriors' graves and as such forbade anyone to deface them. He then placed "two medals and some glass beads on each one."

This was the only occasion in Australia that he distributed medals, according to his journal. He must have had intentions of distributing them at King George Sound as he



obviously had a number on him at the time. At the same time a group of Baudin's men met eight aborigines nearby and as they were not carrying any gifts they tore buttons off their jackets and gave them to the five males present. The natives showed little interest in them and either handed them back or left them on the ground.

Just prior to his departure Louis de Freycinet gave Baudin a parchment left by Matthew Flinders stating that he had arrived at King George Sound and was bound for Sydney. Frank Horner states in his book "The French Reconnaissance" that a medal was with the note. The "medal" was probably a coin as Flinders did not have an exploration medal for his voyages and the numismatic item was most likely meant as a reward for the finder, and hopefully the note would be passed on to the Governor of New South Wales should anything happen to Flinders on his way to Sydney.

It is hard to imagine what the indigenous people of the region, the Nyungars, thought of these alien objects on their ceremonial site. The fate of these medals appears never to have been recorded. They may have been removed by the Nyungars, or later explorers or whalers who later established Albany on the shore of King George Sound.

Incidentally, whilst Baudin was at the Sound an American whaling ship, the "Union", commanded by Captain Pendleton, anchored there. It is unknown if his ship had any medals for distribution, however we do know that at least two American commercial ships, the *COLUMBIA* and *WASHINGTON*, issued medals to natives of the Pacific during the latter half of the 18th century.

On the 1st of March he left the Sound and headed for Shark Bay, about 900 kilometres north of the city of Perth, then onto Coupang in the Dutch East Indies. Nicolas Baudin then planned to survey the Gulf of Carpentaria in Northern Australia, which at that time was part of New South Wales. However due to his and the crews' ill health, threatening monsoon weather and a shortage of fresh water,

he sailed for Mauritius. He died on the French island on the 16th of September, 1803 and was buried with full naval honours.

The leadership then passed to the original second in command of the *NATURALISTE*, Pierre Milius who transferred to the flag ship before the two main ships permanently parted. The leadership of the expedition was bitterly challenged unsuccessfully by Henri de Freycinet. The *CASUARINA* remained in the colony, and the *GEOGRAPHE* arrived back in France on the 25th March, 1804.

RESULTS OF THE VOYAGE

Whilst the voyage was deemed to be a failure politically, because it only discovered a small portion of the south coast, it brought back more than 10,000 specimens, including some previously unknown animals and plant life. In 1806 the French Government agreed to sponsor a publication recording the expedition. Francois Peron, an officer on board the *NATURALISTE*, was responsible for the historical section and Louis Freycinet, of the *NATURALISTE*, and later the Commander of the third vessel, the *CASUARINA*, for the nautical part of the narrative. It was published in a number of volumes over a period of years, and the map volume was printed in 1812, some 9 years after Tasmania was settled by the British. Both authors implied that Baudin's lack of personality and leadership skills led to the expedition's failure to be the first to explore, sight and chart the whole unknown southern coast of Australia.

TERRITORIAL IMPLICATIONS

Baudin's passport from the English Admiralty probably implied or forbade annexation of territories that clearly belonged to the British, and the islands in Bass Strait, in particular King Island was a grey area. When Captain Phillip expanded New South Wales in 1778 it was assumed that Tasmania formed part of the mainland and that the islands in the Strait were unknown. Thus the Governor of N.S.W. sent troops to the island to ensure it was not claimed by the French. Baudin open-

ly admitted in Sydney that he was not interested in territory in Australia for France, but he was certainly upset with the British after the flag raising episode on King Island in Bass Strait. He had a copy of Cook's journals on board and it is most likely that he had read the section on Tasmania where Cook had distributed medals. Was it purely coincidental that the commander left medals and not buttons or other items of barter at King George Sound? He must have intended to distribute them there as he had them on his person, and he would most likely have given them to aborigines had he personally come across any. Baudin mentioned the fact that he did leave medals behind but failed, or deliberately played down the reason for doing so. Were they deliberately left there for the purpose of laying the foundations for a territorial claim?

Baudin did not distribute medals at Shark Bay, where he made his last contact with Australia, but it must be remembered the territory was already claimed by the French, therefore he had no need to distribute them, or did he simply have none left?

The British were always worried that the French were going to settle in Western Australia, and as a direct result of that fear in 1826 convicts from New South Wales were transported to King George Sound to establish a penal settlement there. Three years later the whole of the continent was claimed by the British, to stop their old foe from establishing bases in Australia. Had the Napoleon Wars not drained France economically, the French may have settled in the south west corner of the continent before the British.

A counter argument is that Baudin was only going to leave medals at an aboriginal site that he considered of significant importance, and that he always carried medals on his person for this purpose. Both arguments are speculative and no doubt they will be debated in the future. Perhaps further research may uncover the true significance of these medals.

Annexation of territory in Australia by Europeans has been done by treaties, and

sighting land and raising the flag. Aboriginal land rights were ignored, or at best were too difficult to administer, due to their culture being alien to that of eighteenth century Europeans. Regrettably most historians have failed to appreciate the significance of medals that had been given to aborigines or placed on their sacred sites by explorers. Hopefully this lack of appreciation will change.

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