

LAPEROUSE'S EXPEDITION TO THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST,  
1785-1788

by Rear Admiral C. R. Maurice de Brossard

The contributions of Jean-François Galaup, Count de Lapérouse, to Pacific exploration are generally spoken of in terms of navigation and discovery. Lapérouse's voyage which sailed somewhat in the path of Cook's last voyage, ended much like Cook's--in tragedy. There were considerations other than just discovery, however, that motivated Lapérouse's expedition. Certainly he was commissioned to discover all he could in the Pacific using Cook's third voyage as a guide, but this was only one aspect of that expedition. Foremost, was the desire on the part of the French government to gather information for possible whale fishing in the Pacific and for fur trade between the American northwest and China.

The aspect of discovery indeed took place, thanks to the combined efforts of the naval minister of Louis XVI, the Maréchal de Castries; his chief of ports and arsenals; the Captain of the king's vessels, Claret de Fleurieu; and of Lapérouse himself. Furthermore, the king and his ministers felt a need to set up a world-wide maritime operation in which the French could win the same glory that England had won with the voyages of Captain Cook, but all of this was only one aspect of Lapérouse's voyage.

In 1784, ideas surrounding the French plan of navigation in the Pacific were still quite vague. "There was discussion, but no decision," as Lapérouse himself put it. It was, however, a commercial proposition that finally set things in motion. A Dutch merchant by the name of Bolts,<sup>1</sup> who had traded from one Indies to the other, knew the Chinese markets. He was not really attached to any company, but had spent many years in the Far East and was now living in France. Bolts had undoubtedly picked up his information concerning Cook's last voyage at the Cape of Good Hope. He had concluded that the fur trade, which he had tried himself, could become highly lucrative for whoever would secure a supply of pelts in Alaska and on the northwest coast of America and bring them to the rich Chinese market at Canton. He suggested to the Maréchal de Castries that he should fit out an expedition for Alaska and Nootka (British Columbia). In 1784, the official account of Cook's last voyage was finally published

<sup>1</sup>William Bolts (1740-1800) was a Dutch navigator and merchant who served successively the British East India Company, the Dutch and the Austria Company.

and it contained details of his visit to Nootka.<sup>2</sup> In it, attention was drawn to the possibility of building up a very profitable trade on the basis of trading posts along that coast, especially for sea otters whose skins were then worth 100 piastres each at Canton. This proposal was studied at Versailles<sup>3</sup> particularly because France had just lost her Canadian fur trade in the Treaty of Paris, 1763, and London was receiving considerable revenues from it through the Hudson Bay Company.

France was not alone in coveting this market. Spain also was a rival. Because of their position on the west coast of Mexico (New Spain) with their base at Monterey, the Spaniards intended to set up trading posts and thus outstrip the activity of the Russians on the coast of the Great North. When Cook left on his third voyage, July of 1776, Don Juan Perez had already, according to reports, reached the 55th parallel, halfway between Nootka and Bering Bay, but the Spaniards, jealous of their own discoveries, had released no exact information on this voyage. In 1775, Don Juan Francisco de Bodega y Quadra and his pilot, Maurelle, had progressed as far as 58°, the "Cape Cross" of Cook. (There is some doubt, however, surrounding the copy of the Spanish voyage.) The Spanish names of some notable points along the coast are to be found on the map set out by Lapérouse, who verified their latitudes, although their longitudes were generally erroneous.

Finally, a third Spanish voyage had been undertaken by Don Ignaz Arteaga on the *Princess* while Don de la Bodega accompanied him on the *Favorite* with Don Maurelle, now a frigate ensign and second-in-command on the latter. They had left 11 February 1779 from the Port of St. Blaize (21°30' N) and their object was to reconnoitre the coast from the 58th to the 70th parallel north. Their longitudes were just as wrong as those on the previous voyages: they thought Port Bucarelli was at 55°18' North and 139°15' west of Paris. Cook saw this coast from a fair distance in April of 1778, and he put it at 135°20'. Lapérouse who saw it at close hand on 8 August 1786, fixed it at 136°20'.<sup>4</sup> It appears that this Spanish voyage went as far as 60° north to Montague Island. In his publication on the voyage of Lapérouse, Milet-Mureau hoped that "this work will be useful in comparison with those of the Englishmen Dixon, Cook, and Lapérouse."

<sup>2</sup>James King, *A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean* (London: G. Nicol and T. Cadell, 1784).

<sup>3</sup>Archives de France, Marine, 3JJ386, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup>Lapérouse, Archives de France, Marine, MS 3JJ386.

In 1789, Captain Dixon had published an account of his voyage in that area with the object of buying furs for resale in China, not specifically of making discoveries.<sup>5</sup> Thus, England wished to control at least part of the Alaska market as a natural complement to their Hudson Bay activity. Such is indeed the case, when in 1784 four expeditions were preparing to leave from the Indies and England for Nootka.

These undertakings along the northwest coast (especially the Spanish) were to clash with Russia who had already added Alaska to her profitable Siberian sea otter trade. The Russians had been in Kamchatka since 1645. The Aleutians were added to this sea otter trade in 1742 through Chirikov's expedition aboard the *St. Peter* (accompanied by the French scientist Delisle de la Croyère). The Russian move to Alaska came soon afterwards.

By the end of the eighteenth century, two powers thus lay claim to the Northwest coasts: Russia by decree, and Spain by reason of the division of the world in the Treaty of Tordesillas, 1493, and by reason of being the first discoverer. The scholars of the day desired to send out navigators to solve the riddles of the great sea of the northwest, the Northwest Passage, but the straits of Juan de Fuca and de Fonte were less attractive than the search for sea otters. In 1783, Chilikhov was at Kodiak, where he established a fortified trading post at the port of Three Saints, and from there he followed Cook's route of 1778. "We are creating an American Russia," he said in 1786 on his return to Okhotsk, a few months before the arrival of Lapérouse; but the Russians would not get as far as Sitka until 1800. In that competition, England attempted to have a part. Vancouver's voyage in 1791 is clear proof of that.

We have gone far beyond the period of Cook and Lapérouse, if only to show the basis for the interest of the courts of Madrid, London, and Versailles in the northwest American coast. It is thus not surprising that Master Bolts' proposal was well received by the French in 1784. Initially, the object was to be nothing more than a commercial enterprise. The expedition was to consist of three merchant ships under the command of the king's officers; then, in view of the risk of conflict with foreign expeditions, it was increased to two merchantmen accompanied by a man-of-war.<sup>6</sup>

Because of his experience in his recent Hudson Bay campaign, Lapérouse was summoned by the ministers to study this expedition.<sup>7</sup> Con-

<sup>5</sup>George Dixon, *Voyage autour du monde et principalement à la côte Nord-ouest de l'Amérique 1785-1788* (Paris: Maradan, 1789).

<sup>6</sup>Archives de France, Marine, B<sup>4</sup> 319.

<sup>7</sup>Archives de France, Marine, B<sup>4</sup> 319.

sidering the danger of an offense against the Flag and the prestige of the nation should they encounter aggressive competition, they decided on a force of two armed vessels of the king charged with orders to study the fur market.<sup>8</sup> Through the influence of Claret de Fleurieu and Lapérouse, additional support was given to the scientific aspect of the voyage. Astronomers, physicians, engineers, physicists, and botanists were all added to the expedition although priority was still to be given to the commercial objective and the North American fur trade. The expedition had now become a broadly-based program of geographical discovery and diplomatic and commercial exploration which would extend over the whole of the Pacific from the northwest coast of America to the coasts of China, Japan, and Kamchatka. They planned two landings at Kamchatka where it was expected that information might be available about Russian activities in Alaska and the Aleutians. Afterwards, Lapérouse should then go to Micronesia, Australia, New Caledonia, and Santa-Cruz.<sup>9</sup>

In defining their particular objective, information taken from Cook's journal as recounted by James King at the time of the landings in Kamchatka carried a great deal of weight. It is not surprising, therefore, that, on the basis of Cook's itinerary, two landings were planned at Petropavlovsk. In view of the difficulties experienced by Cook's successor Captain Clerke in communicating with the Russians, Lapérouse was assigned a Russian interpreter in the person of the young de Lesseps, son of the French consul in St. Petersburg.

It is surprising that the itinerary planned for Lapérouse to go directly from Cape Horn to Australia via Tahiti. It was arranged this way so that the frigates would be in each theater of operations at the most favorable time. Clearly, Lapérouse's itinerary as finally conceived was definitely modeled on Cook's experience during his third and final voyage.

An exhaustive list of Cook's great discoveries was drawn up by Buache, first geographer to the king, and the navy's office of maps, plans, and journals. Cook's great South Sea route on his third voyage was exactly set out. King Louis showed himself to be an informed geographer on this occasion. He studied the 1784 edition of Cook's voyage and discussed the details of Cook's operations and those intended for Lapérouse in special meetings with the Maréchal de Castries and Fleurieu. Louis exhibited a geographical knowledge and good sense that many seamen and experts

<sup>8</sup>The file among the expedition's papers is important. Archives de France, Marine, 3JJ386 n°2 f°22. Project de Fleurieu et Instructions du Roi.

<sup>9</sup>Archives de France, Marine, 3JJ386-3JJ389.

might have envied. A single example was when he reduced the separation of the ships to a single occasion--from Pitcairn to Tahiti. In fact, he did not go there. As a result, the planned itinerary matched Cook's voyage completely in the exploration of the different areas. The most striking example of this is to be found in the reconnaissance of the northwest coast of America from Mount St. Elias to Monterey.

Once he was under way, Lapérouse, who was empowered with discretion to alter his route whenever he found it necessary, changed his plans completely! "I had thought of another itinerary," he wrote, "but I could not decide until I had rounded Cape Horn."<sup>10</sup> When he entered the South Pacific he, therefore, gave up Australia for the northwest coast of America which he believed he could reach in a favorable season. His new route took him via Concepcion in Chile, Easter Island, and Maui (Hawaii), though on two occasions he had to change his plans because of foul weather. On 23 June 1786, he came in sight of Mount St. Elias and moved southward, hugging the coast as far as possible.

After the Sandwich Islands which he had left on the 30th of May, he followed Cook's path. In seeking the famed Northwest Passage, Cook had travelled from Cape Gregory (44°15' North, 234°30' East) in a general north-northwest direction and had stopped and noted the resources of Nootka. The lateness of the season, however, compelled Lapérouse to begin his exploration from the most northerly point reached. And there, pursuing a different objective, he did a remarkable job modeled exactly on Cook. Cook, who was in a hurry to reach the higher latitudes so he could enter the Bering Sea and try to penetrate the Arctic ice packs, was not able to follow his own inclination and was often out of sight of the coast hidden in mist or driven off course by winds and bad weather. Lapérouse had no time to waste either, and he stuck to the coast seen for the first time in the history of European discovery in those regions.<sup>11</sup>

Comparing the routes is fascinating, especially if we study the map kept in the cabinet of Louis XVI on which Lapérouse's route was charted as each of his dispatches came in. The routes of Lapérouse, charted on the king's map now in the National Library of Paris (Maps and Plans SH 174/2), goes only as far as Macao, but the part which concerns us is the most interesting. On the northwest American coast where Cook's fairly

<sup>10</sup>Archives de France, Marine, 3JJ386 n°1, p. 1 and B<sup>4</sup> 319, letter of Lapérouse 19 September 1786 and L. A. Milet-Mureau, *Voyage de Lapérouse*, 4 vols. (Paris: Imprimerie de la République, 1797-1798), I, chapter 11.

<sup>11</sup>Dixon's voyage was unknown at this time. Dixon saw the northwest coast in 1786, approximately one month after Lapérouse.

simple course was charted, a fold is attached on which is shown in detail the routes and the lie of the coast seen by Lapérouse, drawn on the basis of the journals brought back by de Lesseps in 1788. This piece of work won the highest approval of geographers. Bancroft, for example, called it a "remarkable work, quite superior to anything done before 1787."<sup>12</sup>

Time was pressing and Lapérouse had spent more time than anticipated in Frenchmen's Harbor (Lutuya Bay), where the wreck of two yawls delayed him for ten days beyond the planned departure date. After this episode in which he lost six officers and fifteen men, he had to make haste for Monterey since he had to get there by the 14th of September if he was to begin the long crossing to Macao at the right time. In spite of this, he accomplished a great deal. He was far from Nootka to land, but he recognized the main points of the outer islands and guessed the extreme complexity of the channels separating the island group from the mainland. Cook was of the same opinion that it would require much more extensive hydrographic work. Vancouver spent three periods at it on an expedition which lasted from 1792 to 1794 during which time he was able to map out these regions completely.<sup>13</sup>

The main geographical areas mapped by Lapérouse were from Mount St. Elias, Boussole's point, and after, the same as Cook eight years earlier: Bering Bay in which he anchored, Cape Fairweather, Frenchmen's Harbor and Mount Crillon, Cape Cross. He verified the Spanish positions of Port de los Remedios, Port Guadelupe, Cape Engano and Mount Hyacinth which correspond to Island Bay (Baie des Iles) and Cape Chirikov at 56°10'. There the routes part company. In the area between 56° and 50° Lapérouse's work is completely original since Cook had been too far away from the coast to see anything but its general direction.

Lapérouse, on the other hand, saw Spaniards' Islands, Port Buacrelli, where he corrected its longitude, Cape St. Augustine, and named Clonard Bay at 54°. Thenceforth, he scarcely travelled more than thirty miles from the coast. Although he was further away from this cape, he charted land precisely at 53°20', then hugged the coast again and named La Touche Bay and Mount La Touche, then Cape Hector at 52°, 131°40' west of Paris on the edge of a small island group which he called by the same name, as well as the mountain visible at 51°30' N and 130° 30' west.

<sup>12</sup>George Bancroft, *History of the Northwest Coast* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1884).

<sup>13</sup>George Vancouver, *Voyage de découvertes à l'Océan Pacifique du Nord* (Paris: Impr. de la République, 1800).

He charted a stretch of coast from north to south behind the Fleurieu Islands ( $131^{\circ}$  west); then he named St. Louis Bay, and saw Cook's Woody Point at  $50^{\circ}15'$  and saw Nootka on 25 August, but was driven off his course from it by winds.

Where Cook travelled almost in a straight line from Nootka to Cape Edgecombe, Lapérouse kept close to the outer islands and was able to chart precise reference points before Vancouver penetrated the coastal archipelago. In fact, at  $51^{\circ}50'$  he had entered Hecate Passage; he placed his north-south stretch of coast too far west, joining it to Cape St. Louis which corresponds in latitude to Cape Scott, and he reached the entrance of Queen Charlotte Strait but he did not discover this although he had guessed a highly complex coastal archipelago since St. Elias mountain.

His hasty passage to Monterey is less interesting. It was down a coast-line whose features had already been charted by Cook. He added, however, Cape Round before Cape Foulweather, and Cape Blanc, at  $42^{\circ}50'$ . He then entered Spanish waters and reached Monterey via Port San Francisco on 13 September 1786.

The commercial enterprise which had spurred the expedition in the first place turned out to be a fiasco for the French. They had obtained about 1000 skins at Frenchmen's Harbor, however, at Macao, where they arrived on 3 January 1787, the news of the English voyages had brought the market cost for sea otter skins from 1000 down to 10 piastres! It had been a deceptive market. The sale which was accomplished with great difficulty raised only 9,000 piastres; this money was given to the ships' crews.

Similar to Cook's second voyage, Lapérouse introduced the use of accurate marine chronometers on board ship. There were four of them from Berthoud, one of which was of particular interest. The astronomer Lepaute d'Agelet, who was the youngest member of the Academy of Science in Paris, took it over and inspected it constantly. This notable astronomer had accompanied Kerguelen on his second voyage to the Antarctic in 1773 and 1774.

These were then the contributions of Lapérouse to the discovery of the northwest coast of America. His work fully complements the achievements of Cook who was always an inspiration to Lapérouse. His admiration for his British predecessor is seen from extracts of his journal: "Captain Cook, first among navigators . . ." he wrote at the beginning of his journal. Of Cook's inclination compasses which were lent Lapérouse by Sir Joseph Banks, he says: "I received these instruments with a feeling of religious awe for the memory of this great man." This was his feeling all

through his voyage, for he refers constantly to the immense achievement and how little was left to be done by other discoverers. These quotations reveal not only the attitude of Lapérouse, but also that of the French Navy and Louis XVI. In 1778, during the height of the American War of Independence, the French King even issued an order to all ships at sea that if they encountered Captain Cook's ships they were to regard and treat them as a neutral and friendly power!<sup>14</sup>

Similar to Cook's last voyage, Lapérouse's also ended in tragedy. His ships struck the reef of Vanikoro in the Santa Cruz Islands and sank. Since 1964, we have succeeded in reconstructing exactly Lapérouse's journey after he left Botany Bay, but that is another part of the story.<sup>15</sup>

REAR ADMIRAL DE BROSSARD belongs to an old Norman family whose roots trace back through a long line of royal seamen to Pierre de Brossard who accompanied Lapérouse on his famous expedition. Admiral de Brossard entered the *Ecole Navale* in 1928 and served in military operations in France, Indochina, and Algeria. From 1957 to 1960, he headed naval operations in New Caledonia and there he became interested in the Pacific. Afterwards, he headed the *Service Historique de la Marine* and directed the expedition sent out to uncover the wreckage of Lapérouse's ship the *Boussole*. He was promoted to rear admiral in 1965 and retired from active service in 1965. He has authored many books dealing with the sea and its history, among which are: *Océan des Français--Tahiti* (Paris: Editions France-Empire, 1963), two volumes of the *Histoire Maritime du Monde* (Paris: Editions France-Empire, 1974 and 1978), and his latest work *Lapérouse: des combats à la découverte* (Paris: Editions France-Empire, 1978) details the life and achievements of Lapérouse. Admiral de Brossard is a member of the *Académie de Marine*, the *Académie des Sciences d'Outre-Mer*, and the Hakluyt Society.

<sup>14</sup>Arcives de France, Marine, B<sup>4</sup> 313 and B<sup>4</sup> 315.

<sup>15</sup>Admiral de Brossard, *Rendez-vous avec Lapérouse à Vanikoro* (Paris: Editions France-Empire, 1964) and *Lapérouse, des combats à la découverte* (Paris: Editions France-Empire, 1978). See also for the northwest coast, Gilbert Chinard, *Voyage de Lapérouse sur les côtes de l'Alaska et de la Californie en 1786* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1937).



Figure 1. Dispersal routes of the zoological material from the three Cook voyages (modified from Whitehead, 1969). Some minor routes are not shown and others have had to be necessarily simplified.

