
The mysterious disappearance of Jean-Francois de La Pérouse in 1788 during a long voyage of discovery was solved thirty-nine years later. Yet the story continues to fascinate historians and explorers who search for the remains of his ships. John Dunmore is the preeminent authority on French exploration of the Pacific. More than forty years ago, he wrote a two-volume study on the subject and, since then, has written biographies of the three greatest French explorers, Jean-François-Marie de Surville, Louis-Antoine de Bougainville and La Pérouse. He has also translated and edited their journals. Unfortunately, this new biography of La Pérouse is not accompanied by a preface or an introduction. We can only assume it is intended to replace Dunmore’s earlier work, which has probably gone out of print after twenty-three years. The present volume is not a reprint of the earlier volume, and it might be helpful for readers to know of the earlier work, and how the author’s ideas have changed since then.

The present volume was published in 2006 in New Zealand and appears to be intended for North American audiences. This criticism aside, Where Fate Beckons is an excellent study and a very fine read.

Jean-François de Galaup, comte de La Pérouse was born in 1741 at Albi in Languedoc. He joined the navy as a garde de la marine, or naval cadet, at the beginning of the Seven Years’ War and served in several campaigns. He sailed to Louisbourg, Cape Breton Island, in 1757 and again in 1758. He served on board the eighty-gun Le Formidable during the pivotal 1759 Battle of Quiberon Bay, was twice wounded and was taken prisoner, although he was exchanged almost immediately. In May 1762, he sailed once more in one of the ships under the command of the chevalier de Ternay to attack the British cod fishery and St. John’s, Newfoundland.
Following the war, La Pérouse was promoted to *enseigne de vaisseau* and spent the next five years in coastal transports. Aside from the tedium of such service he learnt a great deal about inshore navigation that would later serve him well. Following a quick voyage to the West Indies, in 1772, he left for Île de France (today Mauritius) with his patron, the chevalier de Ternay, who had just been named governor. There he met his future wife, Eléonore Broudou, daughter of a former ship owner and minor colonial official. La Pérouse served for the next three years in the Indian Ocean and ashore before returning to France. Promoted to *lieutenant de vaisseau* in 1777, he received his first command, a small twenty-six-gun frigate, in 1779.

By then, France was once again at war with Great Britain, and La Pérouse received orders to join other escorts to convoy a large group of merchant ships to Martinique. On his arrival, he joined the French fleet under the command of comte d'Estaing. He fought in several engagements, and in April 1780 he was commissioned *capitaine de vaisseau* and received command of the thirty-two-gun frigate *L'Astrée*. The next year, while cruising off Cape Breton Island, La Pérouse attacked a British convoy and captured two prizes. He returned to the West Indies and took part in the Battle of the Saintes where the French fleet was defeated. La Pérouse avoided capture and, upon reaching Saint Domingue (today Haiti), he received command of the seventy-four-gun ship *Le Sceptre*. He was given two frigates, one being his old ship *L'Astrée*, and orders to attack British possessions on Hudson Bay, a plan that seems to have been undertaken on his own urging.

Despite the distance, lack of charts, and the challenge of the iceberg-strewn Hudson Strait, the naval force reached the entrance of the Churchill River on 8 August 1782, just ten weeks after leaving Saint Domingue. La Pérouse landed his troops and obtained the immediate surrender of Fort Prince of Wales. He demolished this fort and, two weeks later, successfully attacked York Factory. His care for his British prisoners during his withdrawal from Hudson Bay earned him praise from the British government as well as from Louis XVI.
La Pérouse’s quarter century of service produced a fine eighteenth-century professional naval officer who was a skilled navigator, an accomplished sailor, courageous in combat, humane in leadership, and possessed of an inquiring mind attuned to the sciences of his day. He was an ideal choice for Louis XVI to place in command of an expedition that, in emulation of James Cook, would explore the Pacific Ocean, a realm where much remained to be discovered. Zealous and ambitious, La Pérouse worked hard at his chosen profession and mastered it.

La Perouse's two vessels, *L'Astrolabe* and *La Boussole*, were designated frigates. They were prepared with the advice of the Royal Academy of Sciences and the Medical Society. The ships left Brest on 1 August 1785, and after rounding Cape Horn arrived at Concepción, Chile, on 23 February 1786. From there, La Pérouse called at Easter Island and the Sandwich Islands, discovering Maui, before sailing on to the more austere northern coast of North America. On 23 June he sighted Mount St. Elias on what is now the border between Alaska and the Yukon. Sailing down the west coast of the continent to the Spanish settlement of Monterey, California, he conducted several hydrographic surveys. Crossing the Pacific, he reached Macao, China, on 3 January. He put into Manila Bay, another Spanish colony, before sailing north. The first European to sail into the waters between China and Japan, La Pérouse discovered the strait between the islands of Hokkaido and Sakhalin that bears his name. He later put into the Russian settlement of Petropavlovsk on the Kamchatka Peninsula; here, Barthélemy de Lesseps, the expedition’s interpreter, went ashore with the explorer’s maps and journals, which he carried across Siberia to France. At Kamchatka, La Pérouse’s plan suffered a change after he received instructions to inspect suspected British activities in eastern Australia. On 30 September 1787, he set sail for the Central Pacific, calling at Maouma (Tutuila, Samoa) and Tonga before reaching Botany Bay, Australia, late in January 1788. He departed in mid-March, and he, his ships, and their crews disappeared. It is now thought that the two ships encountered a cyclone and were wrecked in the vicinity of the Santa
Cruz Islands in June. Thirty-nine years later, Captain Peter Dillon discovered remains of the wreck of *L'Astolable* on the island of Vanikoro. The remains of *La Boussole* were only identified in 1964. Recoveries continue, the latest occurring as recently as 2005.

Professor Dunmore, who taught French literature at Massey University, New Zealand, has generally succeeded in presenting a whole life. His narrative includes details of La Pérouse’s personal life and naval career that offer insights into the complexities of eighteenth-century French society, something that makes this more than a discovery narrative. Though he descended from a land-owning family of ancient lineage, La Pérouse was not a noble of the sword. His later title of comte was awarded as a matter of respect and courtesy rather than of right. His entry into the naval officer corps had been a matter of some delicacy, and his aristocratic cousin, Taffenel de la Jonquière, and his patron, Arsac de Ternay, were very important to his advancement. The author’s recounting of his naval career and the bittersweet story of thirty-one-year-old La Pérouse’s love for the seventeen-year old Eléonore, and his father’s jealous protection of the family status and anxious unwillingness to allow an inappropriate marriage to endanger it, is well told. Jean-François married Eléonore eight years after they first met, when his rank and standing in the navy, and his persistent love, prompted him to inform both the family and the navy that his marriage plans had gone ahead without their approval. Dunmore tells these and other stories with sensitivity to the class distinctions of the time, and with a journalist’s skill, using quotations from the letters and journals that have survived. He writes in a crisp, straightforward manner, whether about La Pérouse’s early years and struggle for advancement, his combat role in the American War of Independence, the careful preparations for his momentous expedition, or the details of the great voyage. It is unfortunate that the editors did not produce better maps to accompany what is, after all, a history of exploration and discovery.

Where does fate beckon? Fate determined that La Pérouse’s work was unfinished and fate determined that questions surrounding his disappearance persist. This well-written book is highly recom-
mended to students of French social history and naval history and to all those interested in the history of Pacific exploration.

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