

**Dyer, Colin, 2005. *The French Explorers and the Aboriginal Australians 1772 – 1839*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press. ISBN 0 7022 3512 1
Reviewed by Catherine Schwerin**

You are familiar, of course, with the saying “Don’t judge a book by its cover.” Unfortunately, I have a latent tendency to do just that – in the literal sense – so very occasionally I need to give myself a gentle nudge to overcome my prejudice. Such was the case when I picked up Colin Dyer’s book *The French Explorers and the*

Aboriginal Australians 1772 – 1839. The sober title coupled with the (unacknowledged) cover image of a static historic print in shades of sepia and indigo did little to inspire me, despite my interest in history and in particular Aboriginal history. Sadly, though, my experience is that histories are often couched in an inaccessible and loveless style. Not so this work. The reader who lets his prejudices rule would miss out on a fascinating journey into the revealing perspectives that late 18th and early 19th century French explorers had of Australia, not to mention gaining a view of how the aboriginal inhabitants of the continent responded to the strange and at times alarming behaviour of the visitors. At the same time, the reader encounters a view that is, for a change, not through English eyes.

It is thanks to scholars like Dr Colin Dyer, a research advisor at the University of Queensland, that Australians are beginning to shrug off their Anglocentric view of Australia’s historic past. Then for many people Australian history begins with Cook’s arrival and “discovery” of the continent in 1770, perhaps with an acknowledging nod towards the occasional and hasty prior visit of Dutch or Portuguese explorers who would otherwise not jog any recollection were it not for eponymous place names. In his book *The French Explorers and the Aboriginal Australians 1772 – 1839*, Dyer opens up for scholars and the general readership alike the first-hand view that French explorers and naturalists had of Australia in the age of the Enlightenment. Dyer’s credentials are well suited to the task: he has a doctorate in history from the University of Caen in France, is an accomplished translator, having translated historic journals and logbooks into English, and has written several books and articles in French, as well as a number of works in English.

It is largely due to Dyer’s aim, outlined in the preface, of “[endeavouring] to absent [him]self from the text as much as possible, and to allow the participants to speak for themselves” that the work maintains such directness and freshness of vision. He does succeed in remaining relatively unobtrusive, but naturally, the very nature of selection of material for a work of this kind involves making judgements about what to include and assumptions about what will appeal. His choices are systematic, informative and enlightening and represent a broad scope of the attitudes and prejudices – both positive and negative – that the explorers brought with them. He supports his aim of allowing the reader as direct access as possible by also providing direct quotes in French at times, to allow the reader to form his own judgement. He furnishes information about the original French vocabulary used, e.g. he comments on the 18th century usage of ‘sauvage’ (‘savage’) and its change in connotation over time to 20th century, as well as usage of ‘natifs’, ‘Australiens’, and ‘aborigène’. He briefly comments on how the early expeditions were influenced by Rousseau’s and Diderot’s thinking, i.e. the idea that natural man was superior to civilised man, and later how the image of the ‘noble savage’ was tarnished by the deaths of Marion Dufresne in New Zealand (1772) and Captain Cook in Hawaii (1779), as well as the experiences of Lapérouse (1788) and Baudin (1802). The body of the material is

prefaced by a brief general description of the ten expeditions concerned and the fate of the explorers involved. Most of the explorers, in fact, never returned home from their journeys, and Dufresne even had the dubious honour of being killed and eaten by the Maoris, thus putting an end to his leadership of the expedition, but not to the expedition itself. However, the writings of these men (and in one case, the wife of one of them, Rose de Freycinet) deliver us with the records that form the basis of the information in this book.

The main text is divided into four chapters, each of which (except for Chapter Four) is introduced by a clear, concise and unembellished guide to the information that follows. The author goes on to narrate the encounters much in the eyewitness manner of the journals, interspersing (translated) quotes and brief historical observations and comments for the purposes of orientation. The human aspect of the events and the fears, reflections and responses of the participants are related in an accessible manner. Nevertheless, the scientific aims of the expeditions always remain in view.

Chapter One deals with "Descriptions of the Aboriginal Australians", considering aspects of their clothing, physical descriptions, nutrition, dwellings, fires, canoes, and implements and utensils. The events bear witness to the tolerance and generosity of the Aboriginals who played host to these oddly behaved, peculiar-looking guests. They submit themselves to being measured, scrutinised, followed, and encouraged to "perform" their skills, and yet, for the most part, they retain their patience and sense of hospitality towards the travellers.

The following chapter deals with "Relations between the Aboriginal Australians and the French", focusing on social relations, the French perception of Aboriginal character and language, and their attempts to come to grips with the language(s). In connection with the latter, Dyer has added within this section two appendices on vocabulary, one compiled by Péron in the D'Entrecasteaux Channel and the other by René Lesson in New South Wales. Chapter Two finishes with the Aboriginals' assessments of the explorers themselves.

Of course, one of the major purposes of the scientific expeditions to Australia was to observe the inhabitants from an anthropological viewpoint. Thus, Chapter Three turns to "Relations between the Aboriginal Australian's themselves." Interpersonal, social, intertribal and judicial relations are the subject here. Hence, the reader witnesses, through the eyes of the naturalists, incidents concerning childbirth and mother-child and family relations (mischievous children, patriarchal structures, and the "privilege of the strongest"), relationships between men and women (courtship and marriage, humiliated wives, jealous husbands and the division of labour), hostility and warfare (weapons, "duelling" customs and battle etiquette) and the delivery of justice (gathering of council and punishments). The final section deals with customs regarding the dead.

Chapter Four then examines "Relations between the Aboriginal Australians and the British" and the reader encounters an interested outsider's view of the early colony. The French explorers were full of praise for the new settlement in and around Port Jackson, yet were discerning enough to depict in their journals not only the Europeans' gain but also the native inhabitants' loss. Here Dyer includes an extract from Lesson's table showing the growth of population and, far more than in the previous chapters, includes large sections of text translated directly from the journals to lend the explorers a more direct voice. They comment on the unsuccessful British attempts to 'civilise' the native population and predict a pessimistic future for these people. The book concludes with a direct quote from a letter from Baudin to Governor King, which acknowledges the injustice done to the aboriginal inhabitants of the continent with the seizure of their land and the transportation of European crimes and disease to their soil. Dyer allows Baudin to have the final regretful word concerning the future of the Aboriginals among the settlers, before concluding the book with notes, a bibliography and an index: "the hope of seeing them mix with you is lost, and you will presently remain the peaceful possessors of their heritage, as the small number of those surrounding you will not long exist."

The French Explorers and the Aboriginal Australians 1772 - 1839 makes fascinating reading, not only for the view it furnishes of the Aboriginals at early contact, but also for what it reveals about the explorers themselves, the values of their times, and their responses to their encounters with the native inhabitants. It bears witness to the explorers' concern for the natives' well-being and their interest in them as fellow humans, at the same time showing their attempts to interpret how the natives in turn judged them. Some of the descriptions are amusing, some engaging and some shocking. Dyer has, with this book, given a broader readership access to a previously closed source, and thus a refreshing new perspective to early European exploration of Australia - while I have been reminded about books and their covers and not succumbing to hasty impressions.