

The Inaugural Pierre Roussel Memorial Lecture

**Delivered by the Hon. Matt Thistlethwaite MP
Member for Kingsford Smith
At Laperouse Museum**

29 November 2014

I acknowledge the Bidjigal people, the traditional owners of this land and I pay my respects to their elders both past and present. I also acknowledge the Aboriginal name for this land Curiwwal and waters of Kamay.

I sincerely thank and pay tribute to the board and members of the Friends of Laperouse museum for the passion and commitment you have to preserving the Laperouse legacy and importantly educating our community and wider Australia of the French heritage in this area.

It is a great honour to be asked to deliver the inaugural Pierre Roussel lecture.

Pierre Roussel was a determined man.

Establishing a museum in a significant heritage building, in a national park, and on sacred aboriginal land is not an easy feat. The simple fact that we are in this museum is testament to his diplomatic skills but also his passion for French Australian history and heritage.

Pierre was the elected delegate of the South Pacific to the French Senate Council and this museum was his vision for a gift from the French Government to the people of Australia to mark our bicentenary.

Pierre did not work alone and I should also pay tribute to Stan de Hautecloque, Guy de Compiègne, Dr Anne-Marie Nisbett, and Anne Warr who also worked hard and played an important role in seeing this project to fruition.

We all owe Pierre Roussel a debt of gratitude. Our area and our community are the better for his works and deeds. And it is appropriate that we commemorate his vision and work with this annual address.

I acknowledge Pierre's Widow Carole who is with us today. You and your family have a lot to be proud of and I am pleased you are present for this inaugural address in your late husband's honour.

I am proud to have been asked to deliver the inaugural address today.

Despite my Yorkshire surname my mother's family heritage is distinctly French. My grandmother Mary, who is 95 years old and lives in Daceyville is a DeHeaume.

Her father Adolphus Deheaume migrated to Australia from Jersey in the Channel Islands in 1907.

Her brother Rudolph was somewhat of a playboy. He served in the military, was a stunt man, movie actor and a snake charmer who wherever he was in Sydney would travel to Laperouse on the weekend, jump the fence at the snake pit in Cann Park, and begin to pick up the brown and black snakes.

George Cann would protest “Bugger off Rudolph your stealing my thunder.”

So I feel privileged to be giving this address given I have French bloodline, albeit in a diluted form.

In 2007 my wife and I visited the battlefields of the north of France.

On the outskirts of Villers-Bretonneux we got lost and stopped off at a local grocery store to ask for directions. When I spoke the woman behind the counter said “You are Australian?”... I replied “yes”... she then offered to drive us to the Australian National Memorial. Two generations later the gratitude to Australia was still evident.

As you travel into the main part of the town you travel down Rue Melbourne to the Ecole Victoria (the local primary school) and as you walk through the grounds you see on the classroom walls pictures of Kangaroos and Koalas, scenes of the Australian outback, aboriginal murals. Emblazoned on the entrance to the school are some powerful words:

“ne pas oublier l’Australie ”

“Do Not Forget Australia”

Within months of the Armistice the people of Melbourne began a fundraising drive to rebuild Villes Brettoneux. “By diggers defended, by Victoria’s mended was the rallying cry.”

Children gave a penny each. The RSL’s and CWA’s gave money to rebuild the school.

Ninety years later the children of the Ecole Victoria raised money to rebuild the Strathewen School destroyed by the Black Saturday bushfires.

Touching proof of the enduring nature of the relationship that has existed between our nations since Laperouse and epitomised by the diggers who rest in French soil.

Bonds between Australia and France go back long before WWI.

In 1756 King Louis XV sent Louis-Antoine de Bougainville to look for Southern Lands.

In Tahiti, April 1768 de Bougainville's boat was surrounded by canoes filled with beautiful women, he later wrote "I ask you, given such a spectacle, how can one keep at work 400 Frenchmen.?"

He would later travel west to Samoa and Vanuatu until his passage was blocked by a mighty reef that we now know as our Great Barrier Reef.

In 1772 Captain Dufuense landed on Van Diemens land and was first to make contact with the island's aborigines.

In the same year Louis Francois de St Allovam landed on Dirk Hartog Island and claimed it for the French King.

And of course in 1788 Laperouse sails into Botany Bay after 3 years at sea and the recent loss of 12 men in Tonga, including his second in command Paul de Langle.

Some had claimed Laperouse's journey was to claim Australia for the French but we know this is untrue.

This was the age of enlightenment, of adventurism and expedition for knowledge.

Laperouse's instructions from King Louis XVI were to explore the many islands of the Southern Ocean and chart their position to better complete a description of the globe.

This was a voyage of peace and discovery.

The proof of this is in Laperouse's journal entry regarding his instructions from the King prior to his departure when he writes:

"The voyages of the various English navigators, in extending the range of our knowledge, have properly merited universal admiration. More than anyone, the King appreciated the excellence, the talents and the great character of Captain Cook; but in such a vast field there will still remain, for centuries, new knowledge to acquire, coastlines to survey, plants, trees, fishes to describe, volcanic minerals to examine, peoples to study and perhaps to make happier! For indeed a new farinaceous plant, a new fruit, are inestimable benefits for the inhabitants of the islands of the South Seas."

Moreover we know Laperouse obeyed these instructions from his journal entry after the massacre in Tonga when he wrote:

“I must admit that I needed all my powers of reasoning to stop me from giving way to anger, to the rage that burned inside me, and prevent our crews from killing them. They had already jumped to the guns and the weapons, but I halted these movements which however were quite forgivable and I had a single gun fired with a load of powder to warn the canoes to leave; one small craft sent from the coast no doubt told them of the betrayal and in less than an hour no canoe remained in sight; one Indian who was on my frigate’s quarter-deck when our boat arrived was arrested by my orders and put in irons, and the next day having come closer to the coast I allowed him to jump into the sea, the sense of security with which he had come on board my frigate being clear evidence of his innocence.”

This was a time when the European public were expanding their knowledge of the world, enchanted by the discoveries of Cook and Samuel Wallis and others. The journals of their expeditions became best sellers.

Laperouse, who was in awe of Cook’s expedition realised this. He saw the opportunity to build on Cook’s cataloguing of the islands and coastlines of the Pacific and no doubt the accolades and notoriety he would receive upon his return.

But I doubt he could have imagined the fame he would receive and continue to receive from the people of Australia in particular this community, centuries later.

Laperouse’s legacy is significant and lasting and in many respects is just as significant as Cook’s.

I have no doubt he would have been quite proud of this museum, of the suburb named in his honour and its beauty.

He would have also been quite bemused to learn he has a school, and rugby league and netball teams bearing his name or indeed quite puzzled with the colloquial term for this place- Lapa.

I suspect he would also be quite honoured to learn that local aborigines describe themselves as the Lapa mob.

Having researched Laperouse's life and his journey to Australia I am enthralled by the mark he has left on our community, our nation and relations between Australia and France.

Particularly given he only spent 6 weeks here and was probably eager to leave given the damage inflicted on spirits in Tonga, and the death of Father Receveur here.

But the fact he was here, and that he sent his journals and letters from the journey thus far to Europe on the *Alexander*, and that this was the last place he was seen alive creates a mystique, a romance about the man and his journey that endures till this day.

It is said that Louis XVI in 1793 on his way to the guillotine asked "What news of Laperouse?"

It took until 1828 to piece together Laperouse's fate.

It is incredible that, unplanned, Laperouse and his expedition entered Botany Bay mere days after the first fleet.

“On that day we beheld a spectacle which was quite novel...an English fleet at anchor inside Botany Bay.”

Since that time the French have been living in Australia and had a significant impact on our development.

From the French who came on the first fleets, to refugees of the revolution. From those seeking fortune in the Gold Rush to the waves of post war migrants and beyond, the French have one of the longest associations with this land.

French migrants have influenced every aspect of Australian life from the first foreign language newspaper to modern advances in science and technology.

Laperouse’s historic chance encounter on this very soil reminds us that although we were a British colony and we derive our system of government from Westminster we have a significant French heritage – symbolised by this museum.

And at times some of us wish we as a nation adopted a more French attitude to our future.

France is one of the world’s great republics – bold in its outlook, defender of liberty and freedom, master of its own destiny.

Much French blood has been spilt in defending those ideals, including Laperouse's who had a distinguished naval career and saw battle and injury.

I honestly believe if we had been colonised by France rather than England, Australia would be a proud republic and perhaps a touch more confident about our future and our place in the world.

Australia continues to labour under an outdated Constitution which does not reflect our heritage, our identity, and our ambitions for the future.

We are a multicultural nation with our own distinct identity, a modern economy and high living standards, and a geopolitical future inextricably linked to the Asia Pacific.

We are a land with the world's longest continuous indigenous heritage and culture, yet our most important document, our Constitution, does not reflect this.

Section 25 of our Constitution still allows the states to ban people from voting based on their race. Section 51 (xxvi) allows the Commonwealth to pass laws that discriminate against people based on their race.

I wonder what Laperouse's view of these provisions would be.

The answer to that question is contained in this passage from his journal of May 1786:

Although the French are the first to have stepped onto the island of Mowee in recent times, I did not take possession of it in the King's name. This European practice is too utterly ridiculous, and philosophers must reflect with some sadness that, because one has muskets and canons, one looks upon 60000 inhabitants as worth nothing, ignoring their rights over a land where for centuries their ancestors have been buried, which they have watered with their sweat, and whose fruits they pick to bring them as offerings to the so-called new landlords. It is fortunate for these people that they have been discovered in an age when religion is no longer a pretext for violence and greed. Modern navigators have no other purpose when they describe the customs of newly discovered people than to complete the story of mankind. Their navigation must round off our knowledge of the globe, and the enlightenment which they try to spread has no other aim than to increase the happiness of the islanders they meet.

Perhaps were we to embrace a little more of that indomitable, adventurous spirit of explorers like Laperouse, or more of the French culture of freedom and liberty we could overcome this metaphorical reef which blocks our nation's passage to our rightful place in the world and true independence.

But today we admire and acknowledge Laperouse's courage and continue to pay tribute for all he has done for Australia.