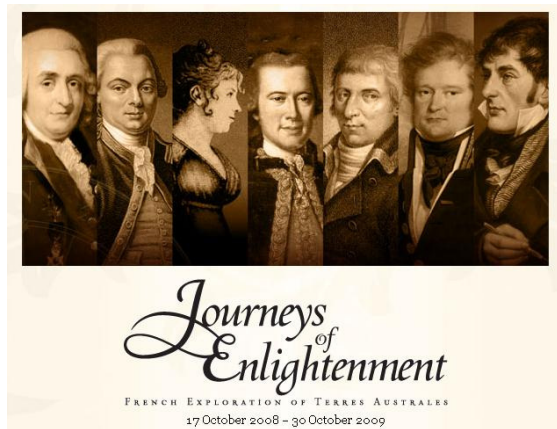


Place names such as D'Entrecasteaux National Park, Geographe Bay, Esperance, Cape Freycinet may seem obviously French in origin. Others, such as Point Peron, Port Bouvard or Heirisson Island may not however, immediately conjure up such affiliations. It is not common knowledge within Australia that Western Australia could have become a French possession, resulting in a bilingual country, much like that of French/English Canada. French expeditions during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, under explorers such as Baudin, Hamelin, de Freycinet and D'Entrecasteaux, have been influential in the naming of over 200 places along the Western Australian coastline. The significant contributions these remarkable French explorers made to world knowledge of Australia and to its colonisation deserve to be recognised.

The Maritime Museum in Fremantle is currently showing an exhibition entitled, "*Journeys of the Enlightenment: French Exploration of Terres Australes*". Henry de Saulces de Freycinet, the only male living descendant of Louis and Henri de Freycinet, was in Perth for the opening of this exhibition in October last year. Having completed her honours studies on the French explorers in Western Australia, administration assistant, Sophie Doughty was fortunate enough to interview de Freycinet.

"Throughout our informal interview, de Freycinet spoke passionately on his family connections with Australia, and particularly Western Australia. Having a name such as his and visiting a country where it means so much must be quite humbling. Place names, particularly in Western Australia, reveal much about an area's history. Seeing the plaques displaying place names dotted around the coastline, such as *Point Freycinet*, was quite a bizarre yet an emotional experience for de Freycinet. As well as these encounters, de Freycinet recounted a number of experiences whilst in Australia where his name generated friendliness and warmth from strangers for whom (and me) it is an honour to meet this charismatic descendant. De Freycinet described the reactions of Australians as, « *une approche sympathique et chaleureux car mon nom signifie des grands choses pour les australiens* » [a sensitive and warm approach because my name signifies something great for Australians] whereas his name in France is not well known, only that it is quite long!

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De Freycinet drew attention to the incredible feat of Rose de Freycinet (who in 1817 became the first woman to circumnavigate the world) as being one of his favourite historical moments in his family's exploration history. These explorations were monumental undertakings which contributed much to scientific knowledge of Western Australia. De Freycinet confirmed that the French « *missions n'étaient pas envoyées pour les raisons coloniales plutôt pour les raisons scientifiques* » [explorations were sent for scientific reasons and not for colonial reasons] however he acknowledged that, « *bien sur, quand vous allez quelque part pour voir un endroit nouveau, vous avez toujours la pensée en tête que peut-être cet endroit serait bon de coloniser* » [of course when you explore a new place, you would always have in your mind that perhaps this place would be good to colonise].

These French origins have only recently been exhibited and discussed, and de Freycinet agrees that the public's knowledge of these links may only extend to place names. Although de Freycinet believes it is necessary that education in primary and secondary schools and universities draw more attention to these links between France and Australia, he states that even in France more needs to be made of our unique links."

The exhibition displays much of the discoveries of the French explorers, showing the significance of their contributions to Western Australia. Specimens, reports, maps, diaries, letters and rare maps are just some of the wondrous relics on display. The infamous women who were amongst the first to circumnavigate the globe are given adequate positions for the public to appreciate their incredible journeys of exploration.

The exhibition finishes on 30th October 2009. For more information on this exhibition and associated public programs, go to www.museum.wa.gov.au.

Sophie Doughty

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