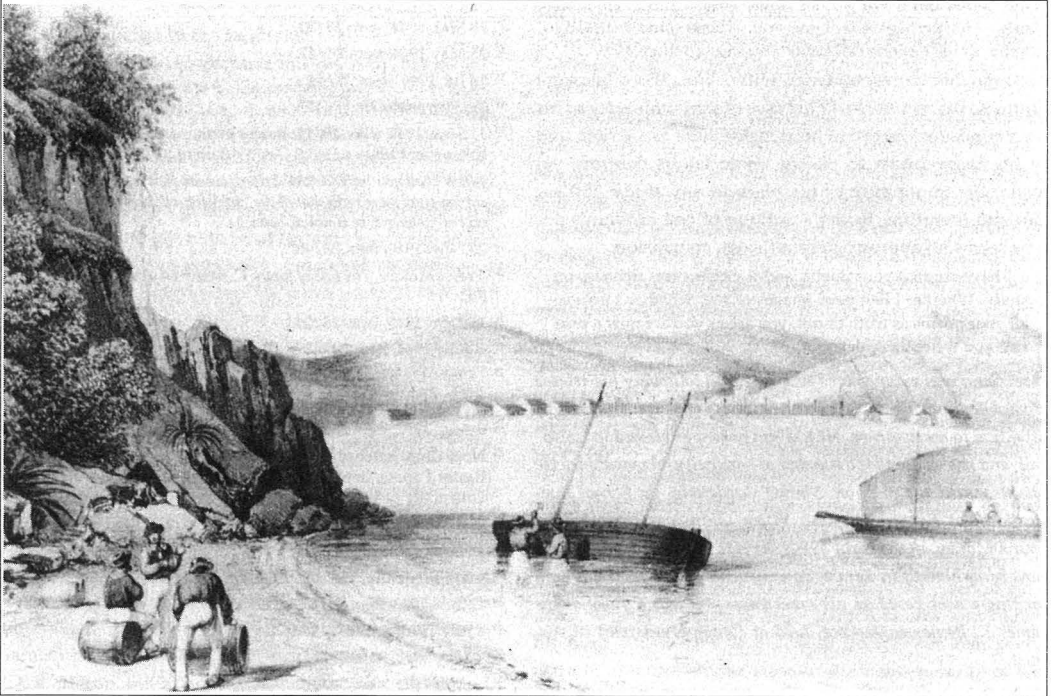


# Early French views of the Antipodes

## *Two recent additions to the Alexander Turnbull Library's Drawings and Prints Collection*



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Outside France, the tally of original works of art relating to early French voyages of exploration to this part of the world is very small. In 1990, a National Library exhibition *New Zealand seen by the French*, was curated by Roger Collins of the University of Otago. It showed a wide selection of the French views of New Zealand up to the mid-1840s, using paintings, drawings and prints available from French and New Zealand collections.

The Alexander Turnbull Library was able to make several contributions to that exhibition with a range of secondary copies in the shape of aquatints, lithographs and engravings from the voyages of Duperrey in 1824, Dumont d'Urville in 1827, LaPlace in 1831, du Petit-Thouars in 1838 and Dumont d'Urville again in 1840, along with etchings by Charles Meryon of his experiences in New Zealand between 1843 and 1846. However, the exhibition brought home to the Library the unfortunate fact that the

only original works of art that we could contribute were Charles Meryon's well-known large drawing of the assassination of Marion du Fresne, an imaginative reconstruction of a dramatic event that had occurred some 70 years earlier; and a few watercolours associated with Duperrey's 1824 visit to the Bay of Islands. This latter group of watercolours are not eye-witness records of New Zealand in 1824 but are all re-drawings by a Paris artist, Antoine Chazal, of the somewhat inadequate artistic attempts of the official artist aboard the *Coquille*, Louis LeJeune. An example of this latter group is a view of Rangihoua Pa in the Bay of Islands with a Maori canoe in the foreground, shown above.

The Library's holdings of primary records (drawings and paintings) as opposed to secondary copies or prints, although attractive, were sparse and, indeed, our holdings of eye-witness French views were non-existent.

It is therefore a great pleasure to be able to report that in the past year, the Library has acquired two watercolours dating from two separate French voyages to southern latitudes in 1838.

Opposite:

Village de Kororareka  
(Nouvelle Zélande).

Lithograph by

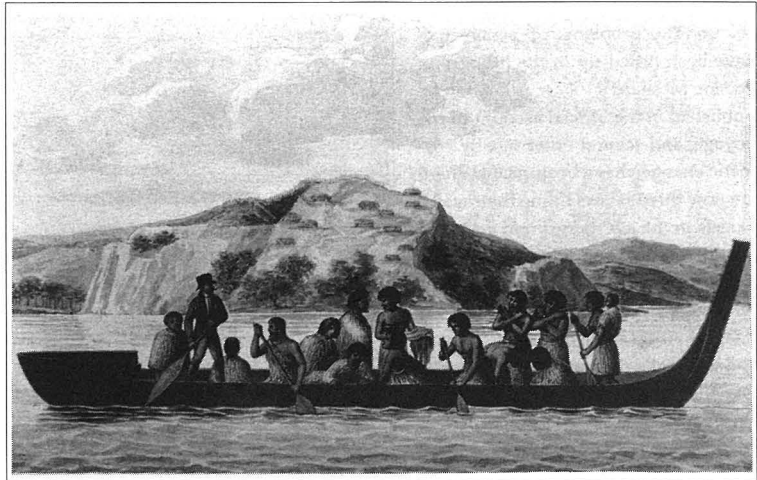
T-R-G. Mesnard, from *Voyage  
autour du monde sur la  
frégate La Vénus: Atlas  
pittoresque*, by Abel du Petit  
Thouars (Paris, 1841).

Alexander Turnbull Library.

Right:

Nouvelle Zélande. Habitans  
et Pirogue. 1824. Watercolour  
by Antoine Chazal after Jules  
Lejeune.

Alexander Turnbull Library.



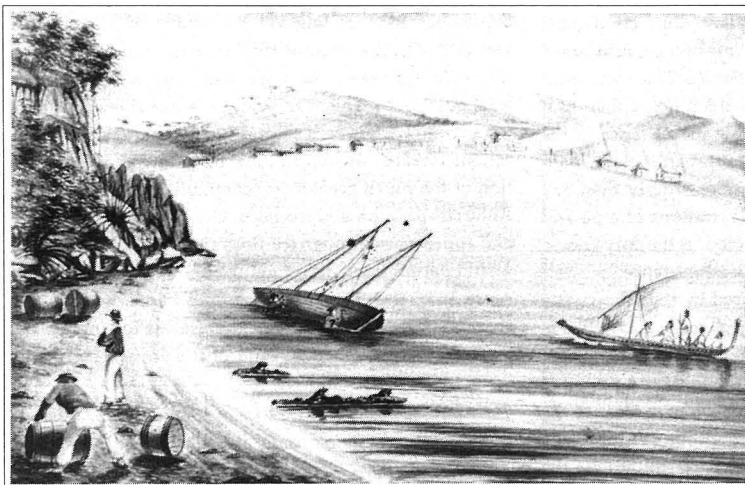
The first of the two, *Vue de Kororareka, Baie des Iles, 1838*, was purchased last year from an Auckland art dealer, selling on behalf of a London one, who acquired the painting at a French provincial auction. It has so far been impossible to uncover any further details about provenance, and indeed we may never know more, since dealers and auction-houses protect sellers' names and identities jealously.

Very faintly in the sky area, the watercolour is inscribed *Kororareka, Baie des Isles, Nouvelle Zelande* and in the bottom right corner in the sea is the artist's signature – Mesnard. The painting is the work of Théodore-Romuald-Georges Mesnard and it shows Kororareka (the earlier name for Russell) in the Bay of Islands, New Zealand, in October or November, 1838.

The artist Mesnard came from a naval family in Cherbourg in Normandy. He was born in 1814, was educated to be a sailor and had been in the navy for five years when he embarked with the junior rank of élève (one of eleven of this rank) aboard the *Vénus* in 1836 under the

command of Abel du Petit-Thouars. He is not thought to have had any official standing as an artist aboard the *Vénus*, but he was one of two juniors whose drawings were used as a basis for the lithographs published in 1841, in the *Atlas Pittoresque* accompanying du Petit-Thouars' account *Voyage autour du Monde sur la frégate la Vénus*. Lithographs were made from Mesnard's drawings of native peoples, and their dwellings and way of life, of European settlements like Kororareka and of extensive coastal profiles. Du Petit-Thouars returned to France with the *Vénus*, presumably with Mesnard aboard, in 1839, but the artist must have come back to the Pacific again, since he was killed in a duel in Tahiti in 1844, aged only 29.

A striking feature of this particular view is its regrettable tendency to fall off the right side of the page. The artist's control of perspective is limited and this is clearly a naive work, but quite delightful at the same time. It must have been kept inside a book or otherwise away from the light, because the colours are unusually bright and clear



Left:

*Vue de Kororareka, Baie des  
Iles, 1838. Watercolour by T-R-  
G Mesnard.*

Alexander Turnbull Library.

for an early nineteenth-century watercolour. The problems of perspective have been tidied up in the lithograph version Mesnard's *Village de Kororaraka*, published in the official account of the voyage, and several other mostly cosmetic changes have been made. There are now three sailors filling their water barrels in the left foreground and they are differently disposed than in the watercolour; two logs floating at the water's edge have disappeared; the two men repairing their boat have moved and the boat's rigging has been simplified; the sail on the Maori canoe is more firmly anchored at its right end; and the town has been made to appear more distant with the sizes of the houses reduced in the lithograph.

The view is taken from Watering Bay, just to the north of the main settlement, with a stream that visiting sailors used to replenish their supplies. Du Petit-Thouars anchored in Kororaraka on 13 October 1838, leaving four weeks later on 11 November. During their stay, the crew assisted a French whaler with repairs, charted the bay, met various locals, both Maori and Pakeha, including Bishop Pompallier, and enquired about the possibility of buying land. Despite the brevity of their stay, the text covering New Zealand in the official account is lengthy, running to over 150 pages, and it is significant that du Petit-Thouars, on his return to France, proposed New Zealand as a potential French colony, although British interests were, by this time, too firmly entrenched for anything to come of this suggestion. The only other New Zealand illustration in the Atlas of this voyage is an interior view of a pa, also based on a drawing or watercolour by Mesnard. This view must again have been much tidied up by the lithographer, as it shows an extremely symmetrical low picket fence in the foreground and an equally neat suburban-looking palisade in the background, both far more orderly than any other known nineteenth-century illustrations of a pa and its surrounds. The *Kororaraka* watercolour is the only known example of Mesnard's original work in existence.

The second watercolour purchased by the Library is a view of the *Astrolabe* caught in the pack-ice in Antarctica in February 1838, an incident which occurred in Dumont d'Urville's third and last voyage to the Pacific. A principal aim of this circumnavigation was to explore as close to the South Pole as possible, with the hope of bettering the achievements of the British in the Antarctic – indeed the



published account of the expedition was called *Voyage au Pôle Sud*, even though most of the three years of travelling was in much warmer waters. There were two ships involved, the *Astrolabe* and the *Zélee*, and they left France in September 1837, sailing via the Straits of Magellan towards Antarctica. Before they reached the ice, Dumont d'Urville expressed the hope that they would reach at least 80° South. This was a not unreasonable expectation for anyone with even a second-hand experience of explorations towards the North Pole, but showed no appreciation of the much greater impenetrability of the extensive Antarctic pack-ice and ice-floes. The expedition made several approaches through ice-floes and as far as the pack-ice would permit them, never getting above 63°. In early February 1838, they found that ice-floes had closed up their channel. They were not to free themselves for another five days. In the published account of the voyage there are a

*The Astrolabe caught in pack-ice in Antarctica, 1838. Ink, watercolour and Chinese white, attributed to Louis Le Breton. Alexander Turnbull Library.*

number of lithograph illustrations of the events of those days and of the expedition's experiences in Antarctic waters, although there is no view that matches this one.

Dumont d'Urville describes the scene vividly in *Voyage au Pôle Sud*:

The *Astrolabe* moved forward a distance of two or three times its own length and stopped. We then had to use every means at our disposal. Men climbed down onto the ice to tie ropes to the large floes and those who remained on board hauled on them to move painfully forward, while others on the ice tried to push aside with picks, pincers and pickaxes the blocks which would form too hard an obstacle for the stem of our corvette. It was a laborious and exhausting procedure ... Seeing our two ships working in this way one thought of two crayfish stranded by the tide on a beach full of stones and struggling to move them aside in order to regain the open sea.<sup>1</sup>

At present, the Library attributes this view to Louis le Breton, the better-known artist on this voyage and the artist for all of the published lithographs of the Antarctic; however it could also be the work of Ernest Goupil, responsible for many original drawings of the voyage, or even the work of a talented but anonymous crew-member. It could be that Goupil was ill during the time in the far South – many of the crew were very sick, and the amount of illness on both ships was a major factor in making Dumont D'Urville give up his attempts to get further south.

The work is rather less colourful than the view of Kororareka and is better described as an ink-and-wash drawing highlighted with white gouache, than as a water-colour. It too, came from England, and attracted the Library's notice through an advertisement in a bookseller's catalogue. Nothing further is known of its provenance.

When it arrived, it was clear that it had undergone some recent 'restoration', with a fresh cut along its left edge, made obvious by the truncation of the image, perhaps indicating it had been removed from a sketchbook or other volume. It had also been injudiciously washed, probably with the intention of cleaning its surface, resulting in the pinkish bleeding of some of the pigments. The restorer has tried to disguise the bleeding effects with white paint. The inscription reads: 'J. Dumont d'Urville, *Astrolabe* command. Dumont d'Urville'. The almost indecipherable flourish right in the middle of the title reads '1838'.

This is, of course, not a New Zealand scene, but views of Antarctica are included in the Library's collecting policy. The area shown is not the part of the Antarctic in which New Zealand has a current interest, being closer to South America than to Stewart Island. It is, however, not only the earliest eye-witness French drawing in the Library's collections, but also by far our earliest original drawing beyond the Antarctic circle.

Both works are full of human interest and are prized additions to our collection of early French contact art.

<sup>1</sup> Translation from Dunmore, John. *French Explorers in the Pacific*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1965-1969. Vol 2, p 348.

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