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# GETTING THE STRAIT FACTS STRAIGHT

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**Abstract:** Matthew Flinders, on his voyage of exploration from 1801-1803, was instructed to search for “any ... opening likely to lead to an inland sea or strait” that led through central Australia. It has been claimed that the question of the existence of such a strait, sometimes termed Williamson’s Strait, was “a long-held mystery,” or that “general opinion” considered that it existed. This paper traces the origins of this idea, the evidence for supporting the belief in its existence and possible motivations for mounting a search for it. In so doing it will question a number of myths that appear to have grown up around the speculation that there may have been such a strait.

## BACKGROUND

Without doubt Matthew Flinders was one of the great navigators of Australian history, and there is no need to recount his achievements here. However, with such iconic figures as Flinders, it is easy to be seduced by hagiographic hyperbole, and so not always critically examine the historical circumstances of his explorations and his role in those circumstances. Consequently, it creates the potential for myths to creep in, that may go unchallenged, and as with many historical myths, for them to take on a life of their own. This is a small example of what may be a myth in the making regarding an aspect of Flinders’ career.

In relation to his exploration of the south coast of New Holland in the *Investigator* in 1802, Flinders was instructed,

in case you should discover any creek or opening likely to lead to *an inland sea or strait* [original emphasis], you are at liberty, either to examine it or not, as you shall judge it most expedient, until a more favourable opportunity shall enable you so to do. (Flinders 1814, 8)

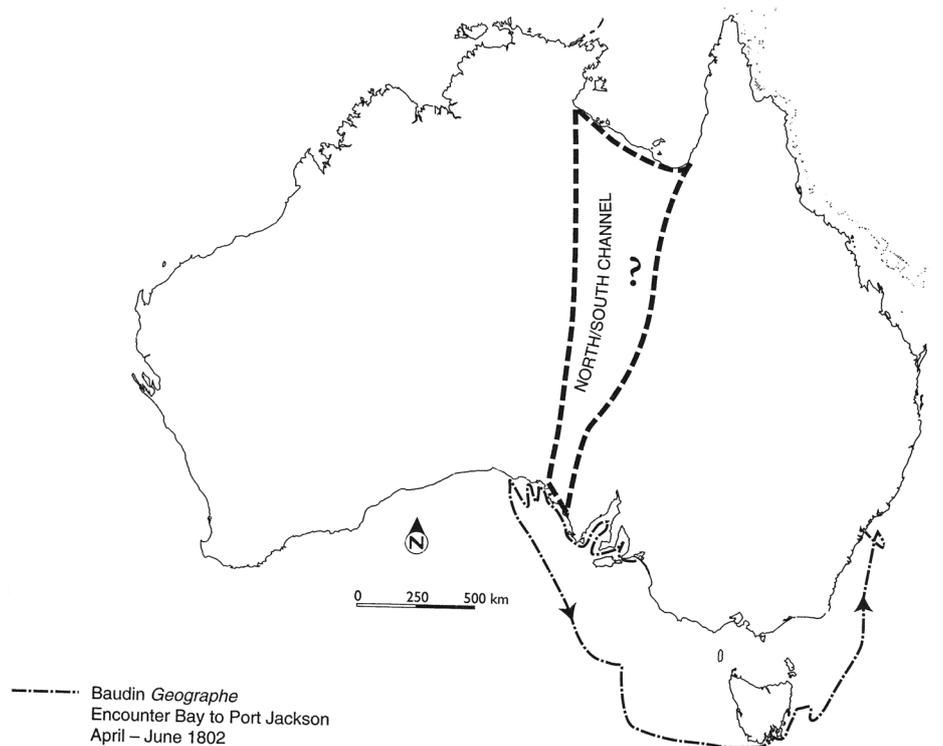
It is presumed that this directed him to search for a strait through central Australia should he encounter one. Some modern historians have stated that the rationale for the search for such a strait was based on the fact it was a “theory commonly favoured by geographers before his [Flinders’] time” (Scott 1910, 25), a “widely held belief” (Austin 1964, 94), “a long-held mystery,” (Horner 1987, 219), “it was rumoured” (Toft 2002, 11), that “questions ... abounded,” (Estensen 2003, 118) or that it was “widely speculated” (Fornasiero *et al.* 2006, 17). Toft, indeed, represented Baudin’s and Flinders’ voyages as a race to find this strait, while Tiley (2002, 137) helpfully provides a map (**Fig. 1.**) showing the possible location of the strait.

However, if one examines contemporary sources, very little evidence for such claims can be found. Where evidence is put forward it lacks rigour, or cites *post facto* or unverifiable sources. Furthermore, it appears to be counter to the state of cartographic knowledge at the time, as evidenced by contemporary maps. While Flinders argued that a strait, sometimes referred to as Williamson’s Strait, might have existed, it may be doubtful that even he seriously considered it to be a possibility.

In his *Voyage to Terra Australis*, Flinders, while acknowledging that “geographers were disposed to give the appellation of Continent” to New Holland, nevertheless claimed, without substantiation,

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**Figure 1.** Tiley Map (Tiley 2002, 137)

that “doubts still existed” whether Australia was a continent and not a number of large islands (Flinders 1814, i). Flinders based this on the assertions that,

The real form of this gulph [of Carpentaria] remained in great doubt with geographers ... (Flinders 1814, xlvi),

The information upon these [maps of the Gulf of Carpentaria coast] are attended with uncertainty; first because the state of navigation was very low at the time of their discovery; and second from want of details and authorities upon which they have been laid down. (Flinders 1814, xlvi [xlvii]),

and

The apparent want of rivers has induced some persons to think, that Terra Australis might be composed of two or more islands, as had been formerly suspected by the Dutch, and by Dampier. (Flinders 1814, lxxxii)

All these statements are highly contestable. If one looks at contemporary maps, there is no indication that cartographers doubted the continuity of the Gulf coast. One of the works cited by Scott (1914, 71), Pinkerton (1802), in fact includes a map (**Fig. 2.**) published in 1800 (Laurie and Whittle), showing a continuous Gulf coast.

A search of the National Library’s holdings of maps showing the whole of Australia that were published between 1798 and 1802 identified eight examples. All these show the Gulf coast as continuous (e.g. **Fig. 3.**)

Flinders claimed the maps showing the Gulf coast could not be relied upon, because of the “very low state of navigation at the time” that coast was charted. He was aware that it had been charted by Tasman, and that the Thévenot map of 1663 (**Fig. 4.**) was based on this (Flinders 1814, xiii).

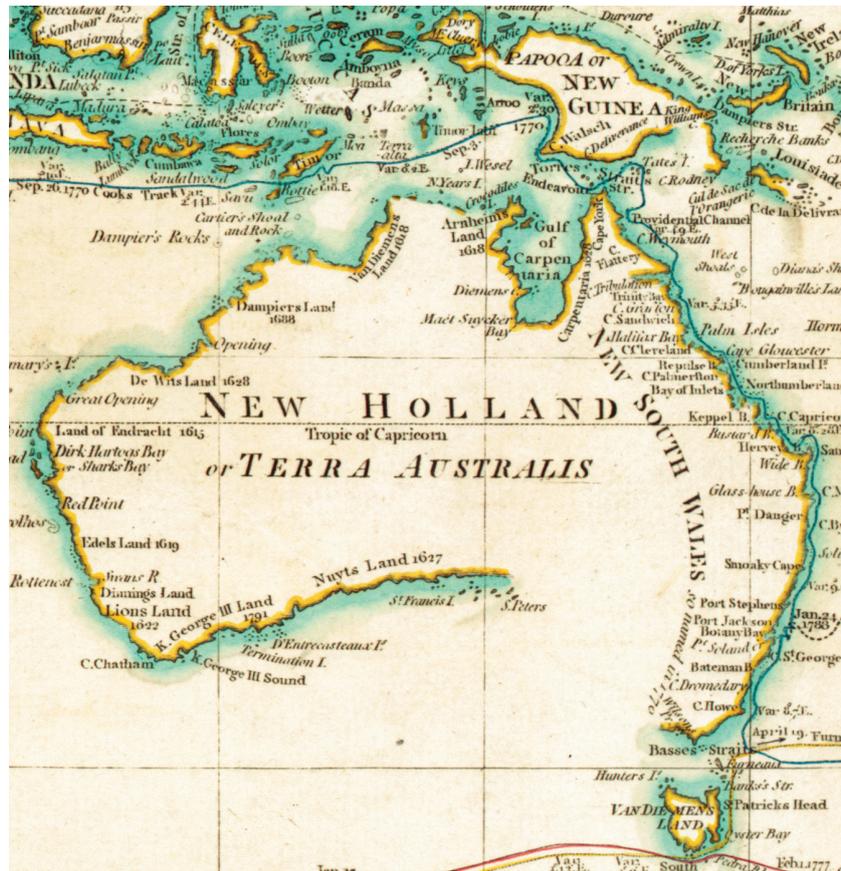


Figure 2. Extract from *A new chart of the world on Wright's or Mercator's projection in which are exhibited all the parts hitherto explored...* (Laurie & Whittle, 1800) (National Library of Australia, Map RM 3074)



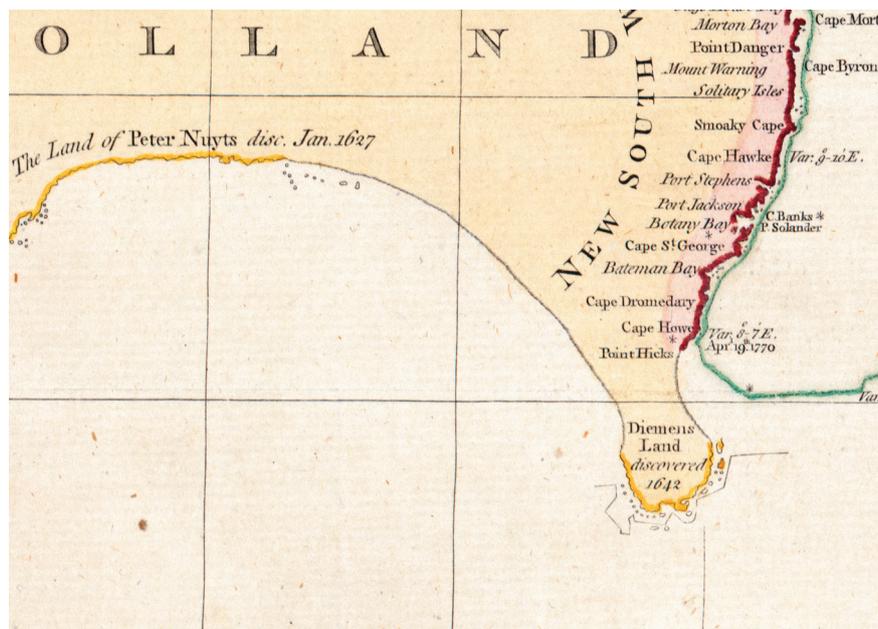
Figure 3. *New Holland* (Cadell & Davies, Strand; and Longman & Rees, Paternoster Row, 1802) (National Library of Australia; Map NK 2456/90)



Figure 4. *Hollandia Nova detecta 1644; Terre Australe decouverte l'an 1644* (Jaques Langlois, 1663)  
(National Library of Australia, Map RM 689A)

It is almost certain that Flinders had seen this map prior to the commencement of his voyage, having been supplied with all relevant charts by the Admiralty, as well as a selection from Dalrymple's collection (Flinders 1814, 6). The Thévenot map was based on a Blaeu map which itself was drawn from Tasman's original map, prepared by his pilot François Visscher (Knight 1966, 87). So what did Flinders mean by his claim the map was based on the very low state of navigation? Was he implying that Tasman and Visscher were incompetent, were poorly trained in charting, or were lacking in some equipment or apparatus available in Flinders' time? Flinders could quite justifiably point to improvements in the determination of latitude and longitude since Tasman's voyage of 1644. This may have played a role in fixing the correct position and proportions of the coasts being charted and represented on maps, but not whether the Gulf coast was charted accurately in terms of its form being broken or continuous.

If one looks at the Thévenot map, it can be seen that Torres Strait is signified by a blank space. This is an indication that Tasman had not been able to determine if there was a coast, a strait or an inlet there, and so he was unable to corroborate the intelligence the Dutch had gleaned, that the Spanish had managed to sail through there, much to the chagrin of his masters. The Dutch never managed to settle the question, even though Gonzaal in the *Rijder* had actually sailed through Torres Strait and back again in 1756, without realising he had done so (Mawer 2006). The practice of Tasman, and the Dutch cartographers, of showing uncertain coasts as either blank, or with plain or dotted lines, was one commonly followed by others, as in the case of Bass Strait prior to its discovery (Fig. 5).



**Figure 5.** Extract from *Chart of part of the South Sea, shewing the tracts & discoveries made by His Majestys ships Dolphyn, Commodore Byron ... and Endeavour, Lieutenant Cooke, 1769* (W. Whitchurch, 177-?)  
(National Library of Australia, Map RM 561)

Flinders would also have been directly acquainted with the Tasman and Visscher's cartography when he charted Tasmania in the course of circumnavigating it in 1799. Did he find any deficiency in the part of Tasmania charted by Tasman? Apart from a one degree error in longitude (Flinders 1814, lxxxi), the short answer is no.

The second part of Flinders' claim, that there was uncertainty about Tasman's mapping of northern Australia, turns on the "want of details and authorities upon which they have been laid down." This is a legitimate concern, ideally one would want to have the opportunity to scrutinise and check the accuracy of the charting. Flinders was not aware of Tasman's journal of his 1642-3 voyage, and the journal of his 1644 voyage has been lost. Yet again, even without access to the journal of Tasman's first voyage, Flinders would have been acquainted with the general accuracy of the part of Tasmania charted by Tasman. Furthermore, cartographers generally accepted Tasman's charting of the Gulf coast; map after map in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries shows this.

Flinders' third claim, that the "want of rivers has induced some persons to think, that Terra Australis might be composed of two or more islands", is also dubious. Who these persons were is not stated, there is no citation and it in fact is based on an incorrect assumption. Many rivers had been found in Australia though few explored to their full extent. The Swan, Hutt, Hawkesbury, Hunter, Nepean and Endeavour Rivers are just some pre-1800 examples. Banks, however, had written to Under Secretary King in May 1798 (Hist. Rec. Aust. 1914, 231), stating:

It is impossible to conceive that such a large body of land, as large as all of Europe, does not produce vast rivers, capable of being navigated into the heart of the interior;

But he did not claim there was a strait through Australia as some seem to think, he was merely expressing his frustration that no way had been found via a navigable river or inlet to allow exploration of inland Australia. This was a recurring theme in Bank's correspondence, again in evidence in a letter he wrote to the First Lord of the Admiralty, Lord Spencer, in December 1800, in seeking support for Flinders' voyage (Chambers 2000, 220),



**Figure 6.** Extract from *Karte von Australien oder Polynesien* (Weigel and Schneiderschen, 1796)  
(National Library of Australia, Map NK 1576)



**Figure 7.** Extract from *A new map of empires, states, provinces &c of Asia, New Holland* (Robert Wilkinson, 1798)  
(National Library of Australia, Map RM 193)

Every creek & opening must now be looked into in hopes of finding a Red Sea, a Persian Gulf or a Strait leading through the Land

The second part of Flinders' statement is also highly questionable: "as had been formerly suspected by the Dutch, and by Dampier." I am not aware of any speculation by Dutch cartographers and explorers following Tasman's voyages that continental Australia was anything other than a single landmass.<sup>1</sup> The reference to Dampier is quite misleading as well. Dampier had suggested that there might have been a strait bisecting Australia as a result of an observation he made in 1699. Upon noticing the high tidal range he encountered along the Kimberley coast, he speculated that there could be "a Passage or Streight going through Eastward to the Great South-Sea" (Dampier 1709, 150). In this instance he meant an east-west strait connecting with the Pacific Ocean, not a north-south strait, and Captain Cook's charting of the coast of New South Wales effectively eliminated the possibility of an east-west strait.

## THE HISTORY OF THE NORTH-SOUTH STRAIT

So where did the idea of a north-south strait come from and why was Flinders countenancing it?

Nearly a century after Dampier had speculated about an east-west strait, Baudin, in proposing in 1798 a voyage of exploration around the world, suggested that voyage could resolve the issue whether New Holland was a single island, or "more than just one" (Horner 1987, 38). He did not, however, specify the nature of any dividing strait or straits, and was most likely referring to Bass Strait, as there was already an awareness that there might be a strait between Tasmania and continental Australia, as can be seen from a 1796 map by Weigel and Schneiderschen and another example from 1798 (Figs. 6 & 7.).

As far as can be ascertained, the earliest documented reference to the notion of a north-south strait originates with Flinders in January 1799. At the close of his *Narrative of an Expedition in the Colonial sloop Norfolk* – his journal of his circumnavigation of Tasmania – he states,

it is hoped that a few years will disclose to us many other coasts, as well as the verification or futility of the conjecture that a still larger than Bass's Strait dismembers New Holland. (Hist. Rec. N.S.W. 1895, 3:817)

The next reference to this 'conjecture' again comes from Flinders, in a letter he wrote to Sir Joseph Banks on 6 September 1800. In this Flinders claims,

Probably it will be found, that an extension of a strait separates New South Wales from New Holland by the way of the Gulph of Carpentaria; or perhaps a southern gulph may only penetrate New South Wales. The commander of an American ship, by name of Williamson, reported his having sailed from the latitudes 45° to 10° 15' south, in nearly a north direction, without seeing any land: his longitude being somewhat to the west of the south-west cape of Van Diemen's Land. This is related to us by the commander of the Bombay ship Hercules, Mr McFarlane, and was noticed in a London newspaper about two years since. (Banks Papers, Section 13: Series 65.01CY 3009/181)

According to this account, an American captain Williamson had claimed to have sailed from the Southern Ocean to the Arafura Sea through the middle of Australia. Of course the voyage was either a complete fabrication or had been seriously misreported. Not surprisingly, with such limited information, it has not been possible to specifically trace this American captain named Williamson from the 1790s. It could possibly have been Hugh Williamson, recorded as being the master of an American whaler, the *Vigilant*, in 1804 (Nat. Marit. Dig. Lib.). Sourcing the original newspaper report is also well nigh impossible. However, Captain McFarlane and the *Hercules* can be located.

The *Hercules* was built in South Shields in 1800 (RootsWeb: Mariners-L Archives), and so it is quite possible Flinders had encountered McFarlane. Nevertheless, Flinders' evidence must be treated as hearsay regarding a voyage that is either a fabrication or erroneously reported.

The next time the north-south strait is mentioned in a contemporary document was shortly afterwards, on 28 September 1800, in a letter from Governor King to Banks. In this King says that part of the purpose of the voyage of exploration by the *Lady Nelson* would be,

to solve the doubt whether the mountains are separated from the other parts of New Holland by a sea or a strait running from the Gulf of Carpentaria into the Southern Ocean, which is a very favourite idea in this country (Hist. Rec. N.S.W. 1896, 4:207)

This is often cited as evidence that the notion of a north-south strait was one that was widely embraced in New South Wales. But was it? As we shall see, the evidence may indicate otherwise.

The final official reference to the north-south strait was in a letter from Governor King to Colonial Secretary Nepean on 31 December 1800. In reporting the readiness of the *Lady Nelson* to explore the deep indentation in the coast between Wilson's Promontory and Cape Otway, King refers to,

the popular idea in this Colony that there is a communication between the South Part of New Holland and its Northern extremity, terminating by the Gulph of Carpentaria which if so Insulates New South Wales (Hist. Rec. Aust. 1914, 701)

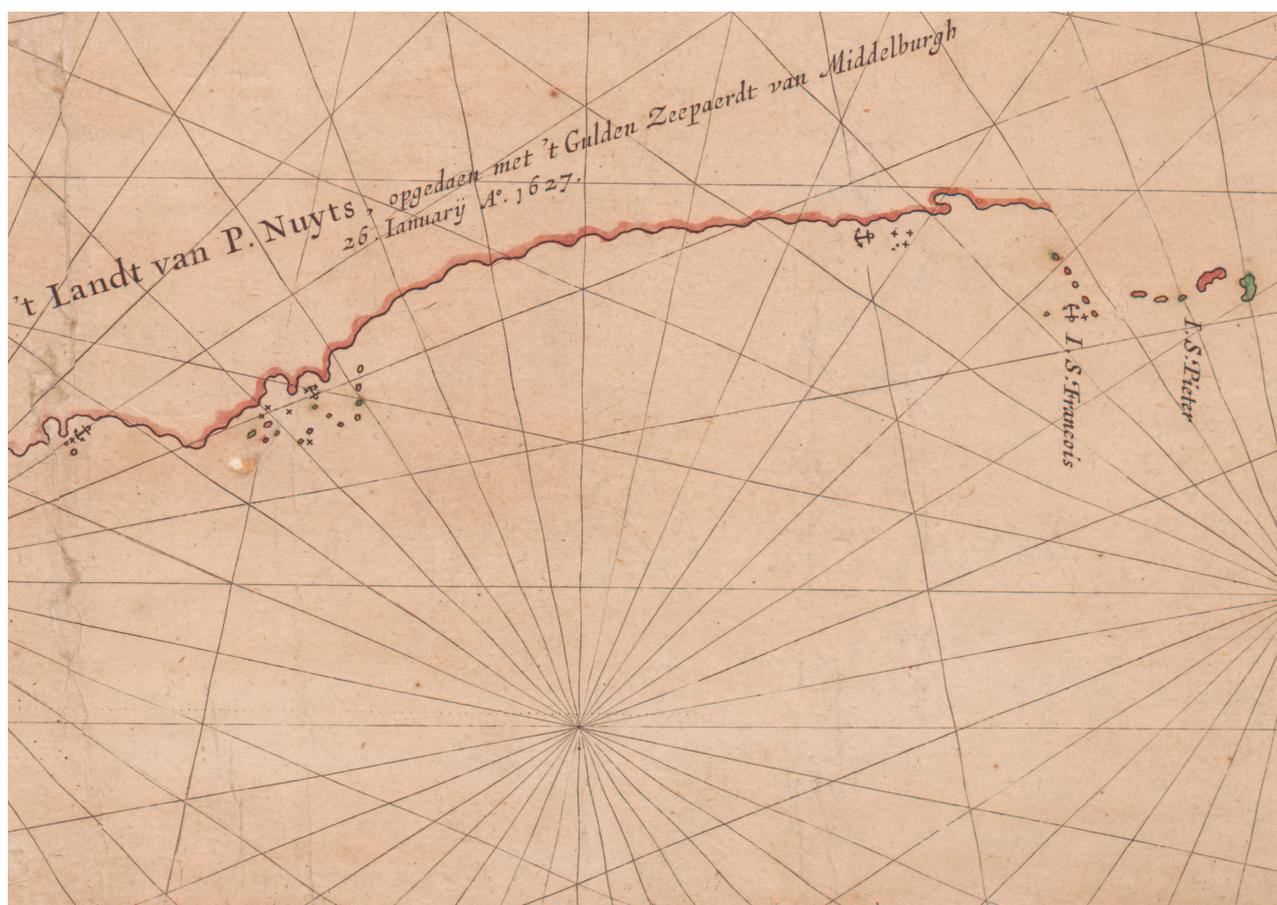
However, to put such statements in perspective a broader consideration of official documents and contemporary sources is necessary. Two comments by Flinders and two letters by King specifically referring to the idea of a north-south strait, and the assertion it was a "favourite idea" in New South Wales have been cited here. However, if one goes back to Bass' journal from 1798, when he explored the northern coast of Bass Strait, there is no mention of any possibility of a north-south strait (Hist. Rec. N.S.W. 1895, 3:312-323). Governor Hunter, in reporting to the Duke of Portland the discovery of the entrance of Bass Strait in 1798, makes no mention of the possibility of a north-south strait (Hist. Rec. Aust. 1914, 132-34). In writing to the Duke of Portland on 10 July 1799, Hunter refers to possible inland exploration via "extensive rivers or arms of the sea" only (Hist. Rec. N.S.W. 1895, 3:693). Some months later, on 26 February 1800, Portland, in replying to the Governor of New South Wales, urges further exploration of Bass Strait and a survey of "headlands, bays and harbours" of the unknown south coast (Hist. Rec. Aust. 1914, 499). In the instructions given to Lt. Grant, and later Acting Lt. Murray, to sail through and explore Bass Strait and the south coast in the *Lady Nelson*, there is no reference to a north-south strait, though the possibility of a "deep gulph" is mentioned (Hist. Rec. Aust. 1914, 501; Hist. Rec. N.S.W. 1896, 4:305-7 & 602-4). King makes no mention either of this strait, in reporting on the *Lady Nelson*'s exploration to Banks in April 1801 (Hist. Rec. N.S.W. 1896, 4:353-60).

Turning to the actual search for the north-south strait, in the 25 pages in his journal that Flinders devoted to the exploration of Spencer's Gulf in the *Investigator* between 20 February and 9 March 1802, he only mentions it three times (Flinders 1814, 132 & 155-56). Days after reaching Port Jackson on 9 May 1802 he wrote to the Lord Commissioners of the Admiralty, but made no mention of a search for a north-south strait (Hist. Rec. N.S.W. 1896, 4:747-50). On 20 May 1802 he wrote to Banks, making no specific mention of a north-south strait, although he did inform him that,

Our greatest progress into the body of New Holland has been something less than 200 miles, and by this means a great and wide inlet, the utmost extent of which was fully traced, but it did not even end in a freshwater river. (Hist. Rec. N.S.W. 1896, 4:756)

## THE FRENCH CONNECTION

Scott, in supporting the claim that the possible existence of a north-south strait was a theory “commonly favoured by geographers” (1910, 25n1), cites, apart from Pinkerton and a work not published until 1824, a reference to it in François Péron’s *Voyage de Découvertes aux Terres Australes* (Peron 1807, 5). In this passage Péron claims the Baudin expedition’s instructions required them to conduct such a search of the coast behind St. Peter and St. Francis Islands of the Nuyts Archipelago. The south coast up to this point had originally been charted by Nuyts and Thijssen in *'t Gulden Zeepaert* in 1627 (Fig. 8).



**Figure 8.** Extract from [*Chart of the Malay Archipelago and the Dutch Discoveries in Australia*] (Hessel Gerritsz, [1628-32]) (National Library of Australia: Map RM 750)

However, if one examines Baudin’s instructions, prepared by members of the Institut de France such as botanist Jussieu, navigator Bougainville, the Comte de Fleurieu, zoologist Lacépède and the mathematician Laplace, there is no mention of this hypothetical strait, nor any specific direction given to search for it (Baudin 2004, 1-6). Following his encounter with Flinders at Encounter Bay, Baudin proceeded westward. At no point was the possibility of finding a strait mentioned in his journal (Baudin 2004, 380-402), and when their expedition reached St. Peter and St. Francis Islands on 9 May, Baudin simply commented that the islands were “scarcely worth the trouble to look at,” but that they could offer “shelter for navigators who may be in the area” (Baudin 2004, 402).

If one goes back to the famous meeting of Baudin and Flinders at Encounter Bay, on 8-9 April 1802, neither Baudin nor Flinders mentioned in their journals that the matter arose (Baudin 2004, 370-80; Flinders 1814, 188-193), and it would seem that it was not even discussed (Péron 1807, 324-25; Brown 2001, 177-79).

## WHAT WAS IT ALL ABOUT?

The absence of evidence is of course not the evidence of absence. The difficulty in this situation is that the contemporary evidence consists of two documents from 1799 and 1800 by Flinders suggesting the possibility of a strait, one based on hearsay about a fabricated account, and two letters by King in late 1800 alluding to the supposedly “popular idea” of a north-south strait. Popular with whom? The convicts? The officers of the New South Wales Corps? In support of the claim of contemporary credence given to the notion of a north-south strait Scott quotes Pinkerton who stated,

Some suppose that this extensive region, when thoroughly investigated, will be found to consist of two or three vast islands intersected by narrow seas (Pinkerton 1802, 467; 1807, 588)

Well, some suppose nowadays that the Chinese ‘discovered’ Australia, but is it a popular idea? Pinkerton concluded anyway that New Holland was “a country fully entitled to the appellation of continent” (Pinkerton 1802, 467; 1807, 588).

As an alternative interpretation a number of reasons – informed speculations on the real intentions and motivations – can be suggested, explaining why the notion of a north-south strait briefly gained some currency. In the first instance the discovery of Bass Strait opened the door for the questioning of previous assumptions about the exact form of Australia. Secondly, Flinders was keen to continue his explorations, and further his career, and the notion of a north-south strait helped to build the case for a voyage of exploration. It also fitted with Banks insistence that a way be found into inland Australia. This is quite possibly what Flinders alluded to when he stated that the search was in “the interests of national commerce” (Flinders 1814, i). The British, Banks in particular, wanted some return on their investment in the exploration and colonisation in eastern Australia. King was quite explicit on this point in his instructions to Lt. Grant, urging investigation, “whenever there appears a probability of discovering anything useful to the commerce or manufactories of Great Britain” (Hist. Rec. N.S.W. 1896, 4:307). King and the colonial administration also wanted greater certainty in delineating the boundaries of New South Wales, particularly with the French showing interest in New Holland. This is the origin in my view of Flinders’ reference in *Voyage to Terra Australis* to the “question of continuity” (Flinders 1814, i).

In conclusion, one hopes that by questioning the contemporary justification for the possibility of a north-south strait, by examining a wider body of evidence, and by considering alternative interpretations that a more balanced and critical perspective on this question may be adopted in the future.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> With one minor exception. One of smaller vessels of an expedition in 1705, the *Nieuw Holland*, noting the extent of Cambridge Gulf in the Kimberley and the strong tidal currents there, speculated, as Dampier had done, that this might be an indication of a strait bisecting the continent (Major 1859, 171).

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