Writing Oneself Out of History: The Journal of Captain Emmanuel Hamelin, second-in-command of the Baudin Expedition (1800-1803)

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Abstract

The expedition of discovery commanded by Nicolas Baudin set out from Le Havre in October 1800 in two well-equipped and well-manned vessels with a brief to explore the unknown southern coast of Australia. Baudin was in command of Le Géographe and his second-in-command, Emmanuel Hamelin, captained Le Naturaliste, which, in 1803, was the first of the two ships to arrive back in France from the Antipodes with a cargo of scientific specimens and live plants and animals. Although the expedition was an unqualified success in terms of the bounty it procured for French science, its reputation was damaged by the serious accusations of incompetence that were levelled against its commander. However, few voices were heard in defence of Nicolas Baudin, who had died in Mauritius in 1803 in the course of the journey home and who served as a convenient scape-goat for the perceived political failures of expedition. Emmanuel Hamelin, a career officer who later achieved the rank of admiral, was one of those who could have spoken out, but who chose not to do so, in spite of his seemingly close and trusting relationship with Baudin. If he was sincere in the one private declaration of loyalty to Baudin that he is known to have made, why did he persist in maintaining a public discretion that was so useful to the cause of Baudin’s enemies? Since his extant papers leave us few clues, the only source that may yet yield insights into his attitude is the unpublished journal kept by Hamelin during his command of Le Naturaliste. Indeed, the systematic analysis of this document, which has to date been consulted by very few scholars, offers us a subtle new perspective on the controversial episodes that took place during the expedition, as well as a new understanding of the man himself, who seemed determined, from the expedition’s outset, to draw as little attention to himself as possible, content to serve the makers of history rather than to be counted among them.