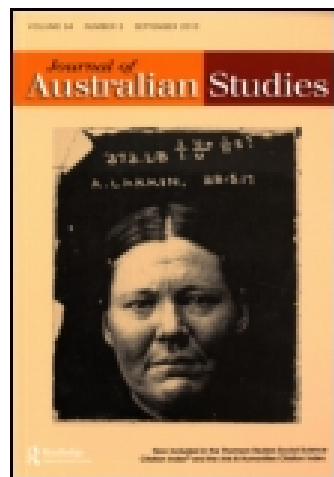


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On: 23 June 2014, At: 19:03

Publisher: Routledge

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## Journal of Australian Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjau20>

### Divine Browns and the Mighty Whiteman: Exotic primitivism and the Baudin voyage to Tasmania in 1802

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Published online: 18 May 2009.

To cite this article: Patty O'Brien (1999) Divine Browns and the Mighty Whiteman: Exotic primitivism and the Baudin voyage to Tasmania in 1802, *Journal of Australian Studies*, 23:63, 13-21, DOI: [10.1080/14443059909387528](https://doi.org/10.1080/14443059909387528)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14443059909387528>

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# Divine Browns and the Mighty Whiteman: Exotic Primitivism and the Baudin Voyage to Tasmania in 1802

Patty O'Brien

When Frenchman Françoise Péron 'begged' his fellow countryman, Citizen Michel, to satisfy the curiosity of the gathering of Aboriginal men from Maria Island by allowing them to 'examine his genital organs', he had little idea what a valuable ethnographic exercise this would prove to be. To Péron's delight Citizen Michel 'suddenly exhibited such striking proof of his virility' that the Aboriginal men 'all uttered loud cries of surprise mingled with loud roars of laughter which were repeated again and again'. Péron interpreted the Maria Island men's reaction to the young and effeminate sailor's 'strength and vigour' as deeply revealing of the unassailable chasm which he perceived existed between the 'civilised' Frenchmen and the 'primitive' Tasmanian men. Péron reported that the Tasmanians 'had an air of applauding the condition as if they were men in whom it was not common'. Indeed Péron interpreted that 'several of them showed with a sort of scorn their soft flaccid organs and shook them briskly' indicating to Péron 'an expression of regret and desire' and that 'they did not experience it [an erection] as often as we did'.<sup>1</sup>

Péron went on to ponder the effect of the advent of clothing in man's sensual development. He concluded that clothing was instrumental in civilised man's progress as it protected the 'cutaneous organ' from 'continuity of sensation which is alone sufficient to deaden sensibility'. According to Péron the penises of 'natural men' were, ironically, 'hardened' by exposure to 'the inclemency of the weather', the 'cruel necessity of sleeping naked on the ground' and 'painful lacerations' from walking naked through his 'uncivilised' landscape.<sup>2</sup> This rare opportunity for the ultimate in male comparative anatomy in February 1802 provided a great deal of food for Péron's thoughts in his capacity as anthropologist on the Baudin voyage which was sent forth from Napoleonic France in 1800.<sup>3</sup> According to the professional standards of the day, Péron imputed his observations of the Tasmanian men's sexuality, sensuality and bodies into his theories on the stratification of races and the development of civilisation which, not surprisingly, assigned French men to the pinnacle.

Studying the 'primitive' man of the world's austral regions was of great importance for the Baudin mission as numerous writers have shown.<sup>4</sup> These writers have variously shown how Péron's comparative anatomy of Aboriginal men was highly useful in the quest to gain 'solid' anthropological data in compiling the 'science of man'. Less attention, however, has been given to the import of Péron's observations of Tasmanian women as this article seeks to do.<sup>5</sup> I explore the representations made of Aboriginal women on the Baudin voyage and examine how these images fed into the 'science of man'. Also, I demonstrate the role of these images in a 'science of woman'. The argument here is that such knowledge was in constant search of 'irrefutable' evidence that women were inhabitants of the private sphere

in all societies.<sup>6</sup> This ideological amourey was needed with some urgency given the overt agenda in Napoleonic France to tighten the social restraints upon Frenchwomen in the wake of the French Revolution which had given women greater levels of self-determination and new access to the public realm. It was in the period between the revolution and the Baudin voyage that the gender debates which dominated the philosophic, scientific and political discourses across the eighteenth century reached an unprecedented intensity. The Napoleonic agenda centred around ensuring that women's lives remained married to a sexualised, maternal, dependent and domestic existence.<sup>7</sup>

By investigating the use of Tasmanian women as subjects for scientific, sociological and anthropological inquiry, this article firstly shows the overwhelming importance that ideas of feminine beauty, sexual attractiveness and nobility have had to racial classification and the valuation of individual women in the imperial context. Secondly, I outline how these representations of indigenous women revealed the sexual politics of contemporary France. In addition, the views of several other observers of Pacific women, namely William Wales, the astronomer from Cook's second voyage, and René Lesson from the Duperry voyage of 1824, will be discussed in order to show that the French assessments of female worth reveal deeper and wider occidental cultural preoccupations about the valuation of women.

Péron, along with the other observers aboard the Baudin expedition, was specifically urged to 'observe the state of women'.<sup>8</sup> Few European voyagers to the Pacific required much persuasion in this particular aspect of ethnographic reconnaissance, and the men of the Baudin expedition did not disappoint. One use for this data was as a 'barometer' to assess the progress different genera of 'primitive' men had, or had not, made up the evolutionary ladder, as 'the state of women' was considered a primary variable in the equation of racial hierarchies of men.<sup>9</sup> These gradations of racial advancement provided infinite possibilities for rationalising conquest and exploitation of the 'inferior' races by those judged more 'advanced'.

For instance, when Péron concluded that the Tasmanian men appeared unmoved by the erotic delights of looking at the women, whose persons had so distracted his crew, he in turn proposed that such indifference could only be a sign of the Tasmanian's depleted masculinity. Not only were the women's bodies not eroticised by their men, he observed that they seemed to know nothing of the sensual arts of kissing and caressing. This ignorance came to light after women Péron tried to kiss all responded with 'that look of surprise and uneasiness'.<sup>10</sup> The degradation of 'natural' man's sensual feelings as a result of living so close to nature drastically influenced how they valued women according to Péron; if these men did not seemingly cherish sex, how could they cherish women?

Péron's conclusions undermined the stream of enlightenment and romantic thought which venerated 'natural man' and instead gave support to a colonial mindset based upon competing masculinities and sexualised expressions of power. Frenchmen were supposedly so developed that they had mastered the art of 'love' towards women, a 'product' of the highest ranks of 'civilisation' whilst 'natural man's' sexual life resembled that of animals in that it was 'much more rare and sustained for shorter periods'.<sup>11</sup> Despite the supposed rarity of this occurrence the voyage artists, Nicholas Petit and Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, each drew an image of Aboriginal couples copulating. These sketches hammered home Péron's presumption about the animal-like sexuality of 'natural man'.<sup>12</sup>



M Kuyper, 'Pelew — Eilanders', from *De Mensch: Zoo Als Hij Voorkomt*,  
Permission to reprint from Dixson Library, State Library of New South Wales

Péron's judgements about Tasmanian male virility echoed the ideas of race theorists such as Comte de Buffon who equated the eroticisation of the female body with the virility of a race of men.<sup>13</sup> Buffon did not entertain the idea of noble savagery of either the male or female variety. For Buffon, man living in the 'savage state', in this particular instance, 'the American savage' was 'nothing more than a species of animal' who was denied the 'sentiment of love' which was his sole means to relate to the female sex.<sup>14</sup> He wrote:

Nature has withheld from them the most precious spark of her torch; they have no ardour for the female and consequently no love for their fellow-creatures ... their women they treat as drudges born to labour, or rather as beasts of burthen, whom they load with all the produce of the chase, and whom they oblige, without pity or gratitude, to perform offices repugnant to their natures, and frequently beyond their strength. They have few children, and to those they pay little attention.<sup>15</sup>

That 'natural man' did not find sensual pleasure in viewing a woman's breasts, the most fetishised aspect of female anatomy, was the surest sign of his dilapidated sexual desire.<sup>16</sup> This was one point made by the French naturalist René Lesson when at Kororaraka in the Bay of Islands in 1824 on the Duperry voyage. He observed that although most of the young Maori women aboard *La Coquille* were 'diametrically opposed to our ideas of beauty', some of the women exhibited enviable classic loveliness with their 'dazzling white teeth and black eyes, full of fire and expression' that were:

greatly enhanced by an advantage which is very rare among civilised women. The young New Zealand women, who in their happy ignorance know nothing of the use of bodices, have breasts which rival marble in their firmness, and which remain elastic and firm despite their fullness. These organs have no effect on men's feelings, in their eyes they are only reservoirs from which their children draw life ...<sup>17</sup>

Lesson's observations also reflect Buffon's writings which instructed observers to read women's casual nakedness as a sign of sexual lethargy and effeminacy in men, a standard stereotype of colonised masculinity. Yet this stereotype was an ambivalent one as 'primitive' man was also characterised as sexually frustrated which manifested itself in violence towards women.<sup>18</sup> This brutish, ignoble characteristic of 'primitive' masculinity was applied to a spectrum of those represented as possessing primitive characteristics from working-class Europeans to colonised men across the globe.<sup>19</sup> Colonising men's sexual superiority provided an epistemological basis for the subjugation of indigenous men. Supporting these constructions of oppositional masculinity were the portrayals of Pacific women as desiring white man above men of her own race. This also acted as a convenient socio-sexual justification for colonisation.<sup>20</sup>

Péron's theorising about the vast distinctions between 'civilised' and 'natural' man demonstrate that civilised man was the true embodiment of masculine nobility. The equation of 'natural man' with nobility, as in the noble savage ideal, was demoted to the view of arm-chair travellers without the benefit of first-hand scientific experience. For Péron and myriad other observers of 'natural man' in the Pacific who were schooled in a more supposedly 'scientific' anthropological method, 'natural man' could only be considered ignoble. Above all else, nobility in indigenous men was not commensurate with the dominating logic of colonisation.<sup>21</sup>

The conditions for nobility in women differed markedly from those in men. Nobility in men revolved around a classical physicality, sovereignty over the self, mastery over women, children and the natural realm in addition to a temperament which exuded power, self-reliance and rationality.<sup>22</sup> The female ideal centred on 'natural functions' of mothering, submissiveness and most importantly sexual allure. Rousseau's ideal 'woman in nature' was a young mother who was devoted and obedient to her husband as well as to her children. She would willingly accept not only this 'natural' gender order but also her biological destiny as a sexual partner to her husband and mother to her children.<sup>23</sup> Of crucial importance to Rousseau was that these exemplary natural mothers breast-fed their offspring.

The issue of mothers breast-feeding their own offspring was a cause célèbre for Rousseau. Breast-feeding made a brief return to fashion for upper-class Frenchwomen following the release of *Émile*, even though 'the practice still remained in question' in some circles.<sup>24</sup> So convinced by Rousseau's argument that babies should be breast-fed for the moral and physical well-being of the state and obviously not willing to leave the matter to the discretion of women, medical professionals in France and Germany lobbied for laws that would make it illegal for healthy women not to breast-feed their own children. In 1793 the French National Convention determined that only women who breast-fed their own children would be eligible for state aid. Similar laws were instituted in Prussia the following year.<sup>25</sup> The corollary of this action was to stamp out wet nursing, as this practice was seen to contaminate children of the upper classes with the taint of lower class women who did not possess the appropriate moral rectitude. Such state encouragement was seen to be necessary since it was said that many upper class women of the time opted out of breast-feeding because they feared losing the beauty of the breast and therefore the sexual attention of their husbands.<sup>26</sup>

Occasionally, 'natural women' of the Pacific were even depicted breast-feeding their infants in highly romanticised representations such as the mother in the delineation of Pelew (Palau) Islanders in a Dutch publication contemporaneous with the Baudin voyage, *De Mensch: Zoo als hij Voorkomt op Den Bekenden Aardbol*.<sup>27</sup> Whilst images of Pacific women breast-feeding were rare, it is significant that they were depicted engaging in such a contested practice at all. The illustration conveyed indubitable messages to its European readership: that sexual difference was a naturally occurring fact and women's confinement to the domestic, reproductive realm was likewise 'natural'. In addition, the image suggests that breast-feeding was a quotidian affair amongst generic 'natural mothers'. Such images of exemplary mothers breast-feeding lent weight to the campaign for European mothers, especially wealthy women, to perform their natural and national duty and breast-feed their infants.

The often densely political images of Pacific women revealed gross contradictions in European feminine ideals as well as the core attitudinal currency towards all women including the colonised. Unlike European women, who wore garments to reshape and mask the effects of reproduction and breast feeding on their bodies, Pacific women's near or complete nakedness, for example, facilitated a most telling discourse whose central tenant was the incompatibility of ennobling beauty and motherhood. As we shall see, assignations of nobility and ignobility in colonial images of Pacific women had everything to do with their bodies, especially their breasts.

If the penis was the measure of man, as Péron's earlier observations show, then breasts were the mark of woman. The volume of commentary on women's breasts generated by Pacific voyagers reflects the intense interest and symbolism of the female breast in occidental culture, 'representing both the sublime and the bestial in human nature'.<sup>28</sup> Londa Schiebinger has argued:

The grotesque, withered breasts on witches and devils represented temptations of wanton lust, sins of the flesh and humanity fallen from paradise. The firm spherical breasts of Aphrodite, the Greek ideal, represented an otherworldly beauty and virginity.<sup>29</sup>

Mary Spongberg has further argued that virtuous, 'virgin' breasts were described in nineteenth-century medical textbooks as 'pert, small, conical and with tiny rose coloured nipples' whilst non-virgin, depraved and 'primitive' breasts were described as 'elongated and pendulous, with large, hard nipples, dark in colour'.<sup>30</sup> Breasts were the key to assigning value to women according to the dichotomies of young/old, beautiful/ugly, sexually desirable/sexually repellent, civilised/primitive and virtuous/depraved. In the course of Pacific colonisation, some of the less prudish journalists voyeuristically conveyed details of the shapes of breasts. In the Pacific context, what would otherwise be considered obscene became 'legitimate' comparative anatomy. William Wales on Cook's second voyage did not skirt around the ugliness that he perceived in the bodies of women who had suckled their children. Tahitian women's 'personal beauties' he felt had been greatly exaggerated by the likes of Bougainville who in 1768 waxed lyrically about these modern embodiments of Venus.<sup>31</sup> Yet Wales conceded: 'The Breasts of the young ones before they have had Children are very round and beautiful, but those of the old ones hang down to their Navals'.<sup>32</sup> For Wales, feminine beauty and the 'duties' of motherhood were incompatible.

Péron's accounts of the bodies of Aboriginal women of the west Australian coast and of Van Diemen's Land further elucidate the glaring contradictions in the ideals of womanhood which owe all to social stereotypes and none to the myth of scientific objectivity which Péron claimed to exercise. The image that so starkly conveys the enmity to women's bodies that obviously displayed the effects of reproduction is that of a lone, 'heavily pregnant' woman observed on the west Australian coastline by a party of Frenchmen from the *Géographe*. Although rare in the surviving documentation of colonialism in the Pacific, it is probable that the observation of pregnant women would have exceeded the minimal reportage of them. This historical silence speaks volumes about the hostile attitudes to pregnancy that are manifest in Péron's account. His vision may also have been coloured by William Dampier's notorious judgement of west coast Aboriginal people that overshadowed many subsequent colonial assessments.<sup>33</sup> Whilst the French perused this woman's body she remained rigid with fear, squatting on her heels and hiding her face in her hands, escaping at the first opportunity after leaving behind a 'spontaneous evacuation'.<sup>34</sup> Péron reduced her to an animalistic creature that by her physical form alone rendered her thoroughly ignoble:

she was horribly ugly and disgusting. She was uncommonly lean and scraggy and her breasts hung almost to her thighs. The most extreme dirtiness added to her natural deformity and was enough to disgust the most depraved of our sailors.<sup>35</sup>

The woman's 'natural deformity' was perhaps a veiled reference to her ventricose belly. The description clearly suggests that pregnancy was an abnormal, grotesque state and an anathema to ideals of beauty. This repugnance seems to be held without question despite the unwavering hegemonic view that a woman's destiny was primarily to procreate. The social rituals surrounding pregnancy in eighteenth century and nineteenth century occidental cultures are testament to the revulsion with which it was viewed. Concealment of the belly through copious clothing, a long confinement prior to birth and the employment of a host of euphemisms, were the main tactics used to shroud an event considered a matter to be avoided by polite society.<sup>36</sup>

Péron's harsh 'scientific' eye was again at work when he along with Monsieur Bellefin, the surgeon, and an officer from the *Géographe*, encountered a group of 'about twenty' Bruny Island women on 31 January 1802. The women ordered the three Frenchmen to sit. Once they were seated the women squatted down on their heels and began to talk animatedly, laughing, questioning these strange people and 'often seeming to criticise us and to laugh at our expense'. At this point Monsieur Bellefin began to sing accompanied by 'vivid and animated gestures' that silenced the women, until he finished when some responded with 'peals of laughter' and 'loud cries' whilst the girls 'kept silent ... showing nevertheless by their gestures and by the expressions on their faces their surprise and satisfaction'. The women's vital sense of fun, at the Frenchmen's expense, did not sit well with the expected submissive and demure attitudes of the ideal 'natural women'.<sup>37</sup>

Meanwhile, Péron's anthropological eye roamed over these specimens whose bodies were laid bare to his scrutiny. Despite all their apparent vivacity, Péron concluded that most were ill-treated, degraded and ignoble based upon a superficial examination of their body shape, skin, hair, clothing and facial attitude. His assessment was loaded with detail of the attitudes to, and connections between feminine appearance, societal status, visceral constitution and worth. He found these women 'repulsive' as 'their build was generally thin and withered, their breasts pendulous and flabby'. Some of the older women had 'ignoble' faces whilst others looked 'fierce and sombre'. His belief in the ignobility of Tasmanian men was also to blame for their state:

in general one could see in all of them something of the apprehension and dejection which misfortune and slavery stamp on the faces of all those beings who wear the yoke. Moreover, nearly all were covered with scars, shameful evidence of the ill-treatment of their ferocious spouses.<sup>38</sup>

However, two or three girls of fifteen or sixteen were exempted from this general picture. In these girls he could perceive the classical physique of 'pleasant forms, lines of sufficient grace, and breasts which were firm and well placed' although 'their nipples were a little too big and too long'. This physical shape coupled with 'something in their faces of much artlessness, more loving and softer' suggested to Péron that 'the best qualities of the soul must be, even among the savage hordes of the human species, the particular prerogative of youth, grace and beauty'.<sup>39</sup> One woman, later identified as Arra-Maïda, distinguished herself to Péron for having 'preserved a large self-confidence and much sprightliness and good humour'. She returned Bellefin's compliment imitating him, singing and encouraging others to engage in a dance containing some movements which Péron



deemed 'extremely indecent'. She singled out Péron and crumpled a piece of charcoal in her hand and 'proceeded to apply to my face a coating of this black makeup' which greatly enhanced his standing with these women, who Péron interpreted as holding white skin as a 'deformity'.<sup>40</sup>

A few days later Arra-Maïda, carrying a baby, met with the French again. A portrait was made of her and her child by Nicholas Petit entitled *Bust of Aboriginal Woman*.<sup>41</sup> Apart from the physiological information in this image, Arra-Maïda's prominent, lactating breasts also provided information about the racial determinants in breast shape that became more apparent after breast-feeding and with age.<sup>42</sup> Elongated, large nipples and drooping breasts, classified as a racial stereotype of older black women, were considered more animalistic and were occasionally equated with udders.<sup>43</sup>

In a later encounter, Péron again made an exception to his overall 'ignoble' assessment of Tasmanians when he encountered a young Maria Island woman. He gave an effusive account of Ourê-Ourê, who captured the men's interest with her 'winning gestures and gracious smiles'.<sup>44</sup> Being young, sexually attractive, suitably admiring of the Frenchmen (particularly Henri Freycinet) and importantly because she was part of a kindly and commodious family group, Ourê-Ourê and her family softened Péron's callous scientific gaze. They were the embodiment of the noble savage which had fired his imagination when reading books:

With inexpressible delight I came to realise in them those brilliant descriptions of happiness and simplicity of the state of nature of which I had savoured the seductive charm many times in my reading ...<sup>45</sup>

This evidence from Péron, Wales and Lesson suggests that a particular body form is determinate of the placement of women on a hierarchical scale relative to her male viewer. Those characteristics labelled as ugly rendered women ignoble whilst characteristics labelled 'natural beauty' were read as the marker of nobility.<sup>46</sup>

The occidental world assigned such little value to women whose sexual attractiveness and reproductive function was perceived as having 'expired', that they were regularly deemed otiose and represented as figures of fun if they were represented at all. This pattern of cultural treatment of older women still predominates in occidental culture. This cultural devaluation of older women can be contrasted to some indigenous societies in which old age signifies respect and status, as old people are repositories of knowledge and are therefore powerful. By contrast, occidental culture valued nubility in women, especially in colonised women, above all else.

The ascendant Rousseauian representation of the noble 'primitive' woman as a young mother, fell into disfavour in the colonial context because the physical effects of maternity on the female body were deemed to be sexually repellent and aging. Colonial representations of female nobility shifted instead to young women whose bodies complied with a particular standard of feminine beauty and sexual attractiveness. For example, it would seem from my research that round, full but pert breasts with small nipples were an essential aspect of this standard. The imposed colonial economy valued indigenous women in the Pacific according to this standard of sexual allure and therefore despite the pro-natalist edicts of social theorists, valued youth, beauty and sexual attractiveness in women and spurned those who exhibited the bodily effects of childbearing.

The rapacity of the French anthropological gaze on Aboriginal people reveals the essence of colonial power and its ability to construct and reshape indigenous populations to service cultural and political purposes. Despite all pretensions to the contrary, these representations of Aboriginal women and men disclose the preoccupations of the Frenchmen and their desire to forge an identity as a mighty race propelled forward by cocksure men in the empire.<sup>47</sup>

*Notes at pages 181-183*