

Letter from Louis de Freycinet to Barron Field, 6 July 1820

MLMSS 7704

To his honour Mr. Baron [sic] Field, Judge of the Supreme Court at Port Jackson.

Rio de Janeiro, 6 July 1820

Since the moment when I left Port Jackson, Monsieur and dear friend, truly extraordinary events have befallen me, which have not only obliged me to modify the latest stages of my voyage, but which have also forced me to follow a route a little different to that which I had first planned for the return to Europe.

I had happily doubled Cape Horn, and had already succeeded in dropping anchor in the Bay of "Bon Succes" in Lemaire Strait, when a furious gale from the SE arrived to attack me and to force me to head out again to sea; I cut my cable, and I only owe the safety of my ship to the speed of this manoeuvre.

During the two days that the storm lasted, I had to abandon myself to bare poles, to the force of the wind. It would have been difficult, or at least very time-consuming, to get back to my earlier anchorage; so I preferred to make a stop at the Malouines Islands (Falklands), which were to leeward and not far away.

So I made sail for that coast, and soon made a landfall on this group of islands, whose northern coast I followed to set myself into the Bay where Bougainville established his colony. I arrived at his entrance in the afternoon of 14th February (by my date, or the 13th by the European date).

The weather was magnificent, and the wind though not light permitted me to carry all sail. I navigated with care, as one does when one is on discovery on little known coasts, that is to say I kept a lookout at the mast-head and I sounded ceaselessly.

Everything therefore filled me with the greatest confidence, when suddenly the ship struck against an underwater rock whose existence we had no reason to suspect: the soundings, in fact, indicated to starboard 14 fathoms of water, and on the other side 13 fathoms, meaning that the fatal rock was narrower than the corvette herself!

I put myself promptly afloat by dropping all sail. At first we did not realise that this accident had caused a leak of water; but it showed itself soon with enough evidence to frighten us. Just as had happened to Captain Cook, it seemed that a piece of the rock on which we had struck had stayed in the ship but that, less happily than for him, it had quickly become detached by the speed of our movement, despite the fact that we ran quickly to the pumps; but although they were excellent and worked perfectly we saw with alarm that they could not save us; the water was gaining all the time; thus I immediately saw the need to get the Uranie to the shore to save at least the crew and also, if possible, the work of the expedition.

However we could see around us nothing but cliffs formed of rocks so sharp that they would have torn us to shreds; so it was necessary to look further afield for a place of safety; and I had no other hope but to advance towards the end of the Bay which ran away ahead of me.

All my maps were so faulty that I can say that I navigated completely by chance.

Night crept up on me in this alternative plan, and arrived to add to our anguish; I had several tacks to make to get to the end of the Baie Francaise (as Bougainville named it); but the wind which had at first been favourable, changed and came to force me to bear away; this was not all; a calm fell, and obliged me to drop a small anchor to avoid perhaps being swept out by the current.

It was midnight then; the water was already at the height of my poop-deck and we were all overcome by fatigue; what a night for everyone, but what a night for me!!! God only knows, and will know perhaps, all the motives which tore my soul! to happen on such a disaster at the end of such a consistently successful voyage! and to fear to see close over our heads a Noah's flood ready to engulf us!!

However we wasted no time in lamentations; every man laboured to give help to the less able; we had to encourage the crew and to fill them with the confidence without which it is difficult to lead men; the pumping crew worked to the beat of a drum; we sought, as you can see my dear friend, to surround ourselves with illusions ... pretty much the story of all our lives!

Early on I had sent a small boat to find a sand shore on the coast where we could beach ourselves, but this boat had not returned; the wind had already made itself felt; although fairly light it came from the ocean, and so was favourable to us; it would have been criminal in my eyes to fail to take advantage of it and although my boat had not returned to give me the information that I wanted, I had to abandon myself to my lucky star.

This was the worst moment of my life, when I got us under sail again. It was absolutely essential, under pain of foundering in the ocean, it was essential I say to run aground to beach the ship, and I did not know if this beaching, were it to be on rocks, would not be the cause of our ruin.

Happily we followed a good course, and my boat having met up with us on the way, guided me towards a fine sand beach where I did not delay in beaching the unhappy Uranie; it was then 3 in the morning of the 14/15th February.

Thus ended, after an agony of twelve hours, the worst tribulations of our voyage. Our lives were safe, but we also had to make safe our instruments and our work, and to have a thought for the future. This was the most constant object of my care. And in that I was confident enough that I would succeed; I had saved everything, and I had not a single regret except for a few of my natural history specimens which we were not able to save from the sea, or which had been ruined by water. I will not give you here all the details of everything we did to try to refloat the Uranie and to repair her, it will be enough to tell you that after much exhaustive work, we had to give it up; the damage was too serious and our resources much too slight. I will not talk either of our miseries during the two months stay on these deserted islands, absolutely without trees, and from which we gleaned only the products of hunting wild animals or fish. However I had put aside about a month's supplies for my whole crew, but I had

forbidden them to be touched under the most severe penalties, because I wanted to guard these provisions to keep my crew during the crossing that I expected to make later from the Malouines to the American coast.

Once we had given up hope of refitting the Uranie, I had my chaloupe extended and rigged and made preparations to construct from the wreckage of the corvette a vessel of a certain tonnage capable of holding my entire crew. My chaloupe must first of all head for Montevideo to seek help but if she was unfortunate enough to perish on the way then we would have the resource of a 100-ton vessel to get us away from our dangerous position.

That then was the state of things when an unexpected event occurred to fill us with joy: it was the arrival of an American boat which providence had led into the same Bay as we were. This vessel had had great trouble in doubling Cape Horn, and was obliged to back off; she had come to the Malouines to try to repair a considerable flow of water which was affecting her sailing. I hastened to offer this ship all the help I could with my workers, such as were at my disposal.

To be brief, in fifteen days I put her back in a fit state to take to sea, and I struck a deal with him to take me, my crew, our work and our baggage to Montevideo. I couldn't say that I was satisfied with the less than generous conditions that the American captain wished on me: in one word he cruelly took advantage of our position to hold us to ransom in the most repulsive way. Later I haggled with this miserable individual and purchased his vessel, and it is on this new boat that I will continue my voyage and carry on with my return to Europe: I have named the corvette *La Physicienne*.

At Montevideo I disembarked several useless mouths, notably the American captain and crew, and set out for Rio de Janeiro where I had the *Physicienne* entirely overhauled.

I will make way directly for France, and will not return by the Cape of Good Hope, where I really have nothing important to do except give my crew a break: that would be pointless because of the new direction that I have had to take.

I was often sick during our stay on the Malouines, which added to my many duties and my numberless worries left me very little free time. In general before and after this time I have not been in good enough form to occupy myself with the note that I wished to send to the *Edinburgh Review* to reply to the impertinent calumnies of the *Quarterly*. Probably I shall write nothing on all that until my return to Paris. It will be then, my dear friend, that I will send you my notice and the books which you lent me. I will always receive with pleasure your precious news and also those of your amiable companion M^{me}. Field; we remember all the time, my wife and I, the times too short, but delicious, which we spent in your company. May you soon return to Europe so that we can see you again, either in France or in England. Above all, stay happy, and keep for me always a small place in your heart.

Mme. de Freycinet is writing a few lines to Mme. Field herself; our good Abbe offers you the most amiable memory. Please, I pray you, remember me to those of the excellent family - Mc Arthur et Hanibal MacArtur [sic]; Mr. King will probably have returned to England, where I shall be delighted to see him; I say the same for the family of Mr. Macquarie. Give my express civilities to Messieurs Bigg [sic] and Scott; and give my compliments to M. and Mme. Piper, also to M. and Mme. Wilde [sic]; forgive me for burdening you with all my commissions.

Adieu, Monsieur and dear friend, keep your friendship for me, and count for all time on that which I promised you. I present my affectionate respects to Mme. Field and to you, my dear friend, the assurance of my sincere devotion.

All for you without reserve

Louis de Freycinet