

UNVEILING TROPICAL AUSTRALIA

Our speaker on 7 March 2001 was Professor Leslie Marchant, a scholar and author well known for his work on both William Dampier and the French exploration of the Australian coast. Professor Marchant's summary of his talk, which was titled 'Unveiling Tropical Australia: the scientific explorations of William Dampier and his successors', follows.

Although William Dampier is of prime significance in the history of the scientific exploration of the northern part of Australia and its tropical neighbours, his work and discoveries must not be viewed in isolation. For he was a product and part of the Renaissance which he helped bloom to become the Age of Enlightenment. And the intellectuals in both of those Ages, of which Dampier was one, harked back to classical antiquity when the foundations of science and its methodology were laid, and when scientific explorations of the world began, for the people in antiquity possessed the same intelligence and inquisitiveness as modern man, and did not stay at home, nor confine their interests as geographical-historical books like that written by Herodotus reveals.

In this lecture I would like to draw attention to Dampier's predecessors so as to place him in a correct perspective, which is largely the subject of my forthcoming book that I feel members of this society would like to be informed about.

Historians of Western Australia are more fortunate than those in other parts of the continent, for it lies on the rim of the proper Mediterranean Ocean: not the little bit of water that was named the Middle of the World Sea by Romans and other Latins who were prone to exaggerate. Most of the major civilizations emerged and developed on the rim of the northern Indian Ocean and the seas which extend to China, as historical atlases show.

Peoples living in those early civilizations knew their stars and other heavenly bodies. They could navigate across featureless desert wastes and seas, and had the means and logistics to travel. They built ships and provisioned them and or took seeds and cuttings to plant on the way or at journey's end. My task in my new book is to draw together all of the results of the researches about the explorations conducted in our part of the world, to show where we have got to at present, so these can be built on in the future.

There are many pathways yet to be examined. One of the most important of these stems from Eratosthenes (c 276- 194 or 192 BC) calculating the length of the circumference of the Earth. Suggestions have been made that the skilled and knowledgeable seamen and mathematical geographers could have tried to confirm Eratosthenes calculations by way of a circumnavigation. Evidence for this has been

sought for some time, as has the search for early Chinese and other explorations of our region.

That trade formed part of the early contacts made between lands and peoples is not in doubt. Archaeological and literary evidence supports this. For example, the Bible records Solomon and his Phoenician partners trade links with the Land of Ophir, and the foreign goods that were imported.

This brings us back to Dampier. He sought to discover and describe all of the resources in our tropical region, as he had done in the West Indies. And he did this well, laying the foundations for modern resource surveying based on scientific methods. It was this contribution that earned him a place in Napoleon's Gallery of Notables, representing British explorations. For his books were designed to develop the wealth of nations.