

LOUIS-ANTOINE DE BOUGAINVILLE

(November 11, 1729 – August 31, 1811)

by HEINZ KLAUS STRICK, Germany

According to the wishes of his father who was a wealthy lawyer in Paris and, from 1741, deputy mayor and thus a member of the nobility (*noblesse de robe*), LOUIS-ANTOINE DE BOUGAINVILLE was to pursue a legal career.



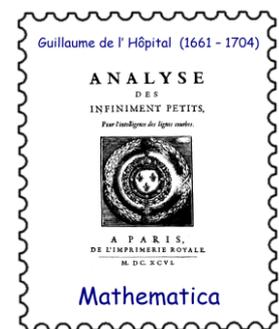
After attending school, the young nobleman began to study law, but also listened to lectures on literature and art as part of a classical humanist education; he was also interested in the natural sciences.

Inspired by a family friend, the mathematician and philosopher JEAN LE ROND D'ALEMBERT (1717 – 1783), he also studied mathematics, in particular the first book on differential calculus by the MARQUIS DE L'HÔPITAL from 1696: *Analyse des infiniment petits pour l'intelligence des lignes courbes* (Analysis of the infinitely small for understanding curves).

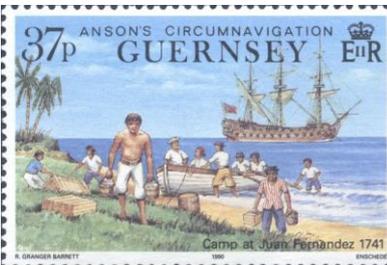
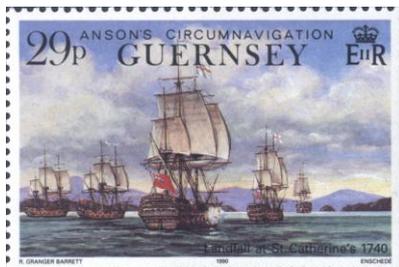
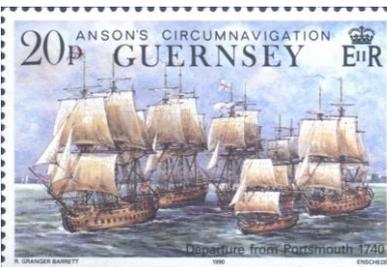


BOUGAINVILLE wrote a supplement to this book, which appeared in 1752: *Traité du calcul intégral* (Treatise on integral calculus).

The book, written with great clarity, prompted the *Royal Society* to admit him as a member. A second volume was also published in 1756, but BOUGAINVILLE had long since given up mathematics.



LOUIS-ANTOINE DE BOUGAINVILLE temporarily joined the French army in 1754, then travelled to London as secretary to the French ambassador, where he met, among others, the circumnavigator GEORGE ANSON.



During these conversations, he became convinced that it was important for France's position of power to conquer new colonies. After returning from London, he began a military career with the French troops in Canada. At the end of the *Seven Years' War* (1756 – 1763), which was fought not only in Europe but also in the colonial territories, the French had to give up their colony *La Nouvelle France* around Quebec, as well as the colonies of Florida (to Spain), Louisiana, Senegal and Guinea (to England).

After a short period as a prisoner of war, BOUGAINVILLE returned to France and joined the navy – convinced that he must make his own contribution to compensate for the loss of French power.

He asked the king for permission to take the Falkland Islands (Malvinas) at the southern tip of South America, which were "uninhabited" at the time, as a French colony and base for future expeditions to the Pacific. When BOUGAINVILLE returned to France after a successful self-financed mission, he was informed that the king wanted to cede the newly won colony again in order to avoid diplomatic disputes with Spain, and that he, BOUGAINVILLE, should carry out the handover of the colony to Spain on the spot.

BOUGAINVILLE forged new plans since he wanted to combine this second voyage to the South Atlantic with a circumnavigation of the globe, find bases in the Pacific for trade with China, win colonies for the French crown and, above all, discover the presumed southern continent of *Terra Australis*.

Accompanied by distinguished scientists, a botanist, a doctor, a draughtsman and an astronomer, they set sail in December 1766 and later, the escort ship *Étoile* joined them, with a total crew of 300. During a stopover in Brazil, the botanist discovered a flowering plant to which he gives the name *Bougainvillea* (there are 14 species of this plant growing in different regions).



After passing through the *Strait of MAGELLAN* (duration: 52 days!), the two ships sailed northwest until, after almost three months, they finally came across the fertile archipelago of Tahiti, which seems like paradise after the privations.

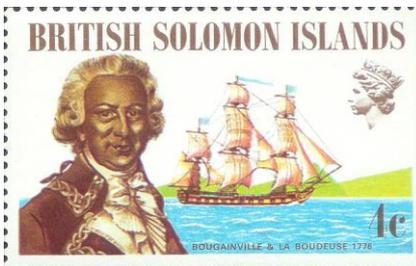
Later, the description of the predominantly peaceful stay of only nine days and the encounter with the friendly population, which until then had had no contact with the "civilised world", would form an essential part of BOUGAINVILLE's research report and arouse the curiosity of the Parisian salons:

Above all, they wanted to get to know the native AOTOUROU, who accompanied BOUGAINVILLE to France at his own request and whose return journey BOUGAINVILLE later financed from his fortune.

The further expedition led past Samoa, then to the island that is now called Vanuatu.

It almost reached the Australian continent, which JAMES COOK would take possession of for the British crown only three years later, but it changed course to the north and reached the Solomon Islands via Papua New Guinea, and finally the Dutch colony of Batavia (today: Djakarta).





From there, the two ships sailed to the French colony of Île de France (today: Mauritius) and then continued via Cape Town and St Helena and reached the French coast again after two years and four months.

BOUGAINVILLE's travelogue *Voyage autour du monde* was the work of a scientist in the *Age of Enlightenment*. In its objectivity without value judgements and the effort to adequately perceive what was observed (after detailed interviews with AOTOUROU), it met scientific standards and the clear, stylistically varied language had a literary level. But it also shaped the image of Tahiti as an earthly paradise as well as that of the *noble savages* living in happy innocence in the writings of JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU.



Although BOUGAINVILLE did not find any islands with mineral resources or unknown spices on his voyage around the world, the French were proud to now also belong to the *discoverer nations*.

In addition, the expedition led to new geographical findings, numerous unknown plants could be classified and the phonetic studies and ethnographic observations are still of value today.

When the American *War of Independence* broke out in 1778, the insurgents were supported by France. BOUGAINVILLE took part in several sea battles with the ship he led. After a naval battle in the Caribbean, he returned home, married and settled with his family (four sons) in Normandy.

After the outbreak of the *French Revolution* he fought on the side of the king, fled Paris when the situation became hopeless, but was captured by the revolutionary troops and only escaped death by guillotine with luck.

In 1795 he was appointed a member of the *Academy of Sciences* and of the *Bureau des Longitudes*. He was fully rehabilitated by NAPOLEON and received the title of *Comte d'Empire*.

When he died at the age of 81, he was solemnly buried in the *Panthéon*, the French *Hall of Fame*.

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Translated 2021 by John O'Connor, University of St Andrews
