English Historical Review Vol. CXXXIX No. 598-599 Advance Access publication August 2, 2024
https://doi.org/10.1093/ehr/cead196
© The Author(s) 2024. Published by Oxford University Press.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial reproduction and distribution of the work, in any medium, provided the original work is not altered or transformed in any way, and that the work is properly cited. For commercial re-use, please contact reprints@oup.com for reprints and translation rights for reprints. All other permissions can be obtained through our RightsLink service via the Permissions link on the article page on our site—for further information please contact journals.permissions@oup.com.

Early Modern Histories of Fire on the Australian Continent[*]

In charting the north coast of the Southland continent in the vessels *Cleen Amsterdam* and *Wesel* during 1636, the Dutch East India Company (hereafter VOC or Company) subcargo Pieter Pieterszoon recorded multiple signs of smoke and fire in the mission's official journal: 'We saw smoke, indeed, in many parts of the inland, but no natives, houses or vessels'; 'In many places we saw great clouds of smoke land inward, but no fruit-trees, houses, vessels or natives'; 'landinward we observed a number of fires'; 'The whole day we saw a good deal of smoke landinward'; 'we saw smoke rising in various places'.[1] These observations scarcely constituted the information about the inhabitants of these lands that the expedition's instructions had optimistically sought, charging that:

> [c]lose attention should be paid to the disposition of the people, their character, condition and humours; to the religion they profess and to their manner of government; their wars, their arms and weapons; the food they eat and the clothes they wear, and that they mainly subsist on.[2]

The journey's outcomes were summed up in dispiriting terms in the daily register on Pieterszoon's return to Batavia: 'he has seen many fires and frequent clouds of smoke, but no natives, houses, prows or fruit-trees, although he has paddled close along the shore with an orangbay [ship's tender], and gone ashore in sundry places … not having been able to come to parley with any of the inhabitants'.[3] For Pieterszoon

* I am sincerely grateful for the assistance of Heather Excell at the University of Tasmania Library Special and Rare Collections, and the advice and insights of the editors, copy-editors and anonymous referees of the *English Historical Review*.

1. 'Saegen wel op veel plaetsen in't lant roocq, maer conden geen volck, huyssen ofte vaertuygen vernemen'; 'Wy saegen op veel plaetsen landewaert in groote roock ende smoock, doch en vernaemen geen vruchtboomen, huysen, prauwen, noch volck'; 'saegen eenige vieren stoocken te landewaert in'; 'Wy saegen noch daegelycks te landewaert in veel roocken ende smoocken'; 'saegen noch al roocken': *Het Aandeel der Nederlanders in de Ontdeeking van Australië, 1606–1765*, ed. Jan Ernst Heeres (Leiden, 1899) (tr. with identical pagination by C. Stoffel, *The Part Borne by the Dutch in the Discovery of Australia, 1606–1765* [London, 1899]), pp. 69, 70, 71.

2. 'Op de gelegenheijt der volckeren dient geleth; van wat aert, conditie ende heumeuren dat sijn, wat relegie ende regiering dat hebben, met wien dat oorloogen, wat geweer dat voeren, wat spyse ende cleeding gebruycken, ende waermede sich voorders erneren': ibid., p. 66 (Anthonio van Diemen, Philip Lucasz, Artus Gysels and Jan van der Burch, instructions for Commander Gerrit Thomas Pool and the Council of the Yachts *Cleen Amsterdam* and *Wesel*, 19 Feb. 1636).

3. 'veel vieren ende roocken, doch geen volck, huysen, praeuwen noch vruchtboomen vernemen connen, hoewel met een orangbay daer dicht voorby geschept, ende op sommige plaetsen oock

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ehr/article/139/598-599/715/7726767 by guest on 04 October 2024

and the clerk of the daily register, the fire behaviours the crews had witnessed were evidence of people whose lifestyles, knowledge, skills and technologies remained beyond their reach.

Pieterszoon's experiences belong among many early modern European accounts of the Southland continent and its peoples that interpreted fire practices and artefacts, including smoke, fire, firesites and ashes, as a way to understand Indigenous populations. Sometimes, as with Pieterszoon, it did not seem to get them very far, but it nonetheless formed part of an analysis of Aboriginal character, as this article explores. On other occasions, records of Europeans document their own employment of fire, especially firepower, to elicit reaction in local peoples and to enact violence upon them. In such ways, Europeans are part of the story of early modern histories of fire on the Australian continent.

Historical fire practices on the Australian continent are rightly becoming a subject of increasing interest and recognition in a range of both scientific and humanities disciplines. Fire has made an indelible mark on the unique fauna and flora of the continent and on the cultures of its Indigenous peoples.[4] Indigenous knowledge-holders have shared some of the wide range of ways in which their communities respected fire to keep them warm, to provide light, to enable hunting by flushing

aen landt geweest is … met geen van d'inwoonders te spraeck connende coomen': ibid., p. 67 (Daily Register of Batavia, 6 Oct. 1636).

4. For examples of this increased interest, see J. Bradley, 'Fire, Emotion and Politics: A Yanyuwa Case Study', in D.B. Rose, ed., *Country in Flames: Proceedings of the 1994 Symposium on Biodiversity and Fire in North Australia* (Canberra, 1994), pp. 25–32; R.A. Bradstock, A.M. Gill and R.J. Williams, eds, *Flammable Australia: The Fire Regimes and Biodiversity of a Continent* (Cambridge, 2002); B. Gammage, *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia* (Sydney, 2011); R.A. Gould, 'Uses and Effects of Fire Among the Western Desert Aborigines of Australia', *Mankind*, viii (1971), pp. 14–24; D.R. Horton, 'The Burning Question: Aborigines, Fire and Australian Ecosystems', *Mankind*, xiii (1982), pp. 237–51; R. Jones, 'Firestick Farming', *Australian Natural History*, xvi (1969), pp. 224–31; S.D. Mooney et al., 'Late Quaternary Fire Regimes of Australasia', *Quaternary Science Reviews*, xxx (2011), pp. 28–46; P.H. Nicolson, 'Fire and the Australian Aborigine—An Enigma', in A.M. Gill et al., eds, *Fire and the Australian Biota* (Canberra, 1981), pp. 61–70; S.J. Pyne, *Burning Bush: A Fire History of Australia* (Seattle, WA, 1991); J. Russell-Smith et al., 'Aboriginal Resource Utilization and Fire Management Practice in Western Arnhem Land, Australia: Notes for Prehistory, Lessons for the Future', *Human Ecology*, xxv (1997), pp. 159–95; D. Yibarbuk et al., 'Fire Ecology and Aboriginal Land Management in Central Arnhem Land, Northern Australia: A Tradition of Ecosystem Management', *Journal of Biogeography*, xviii (2001), pp. 325–43; S.J. Hallam, *Fire and Hearth: A Study of Aboriginal Usage and European Usurpation in South-Western Australia* (2nd edn, Crawley, WA, 2014); M. Langton, *Burning Questions: Emerging Environmental Issues for Indigenous Peoples in Northern Australia* (Darwin, 1998); D.J. Ward, B.B. Lamont and C.L. Burrows, 'Grasstrees Reveal Contrasting Fire Regimes in Eucalypt Forest Before and After European Settlement of Southwestern Australia', *Forest Ecology and Management*, cl (2001), pp. 323–9; I. Abbott and N. Burrows, *Fire in Ecosystems of South-west Western Australia: Impacts and Management*, II (Leiden, 2003); J. Russell-Smith, P. Whitehead and P. Cooke, eds, *Culture, Ecology and Economy of Fire Management in North Australian Savannas: Rekindling the Wurrk Tradition* (Collingwood, 2009); M. Langton, 'Earth, Wind, Fire, Water: The Social and Spiritual Construction of Water in Aboriginal Societies', in B. David, B. Barker and I.J. McNiven, eds, *The Social Archaeology of Australian Indigenous Societies* (Canberra, 2009), pp. 139–60; S.J. Holdaway, B. Davies and P.C. Fanning, 'Aboriginal Use of Fire in a Landscape Context: Investigating Presence and Absence of Heat-Retainer Hearths in Western New South Wales, Australia', *Current Anthropology*, lviii (2017), pp. 230–42.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ehr/article/139/598-599/715/7726767 by guest on 04 October 2024

out animals and masking human scent, and to support many land management practices that provided food and other resources, as well as how they worked within local ecologies to create and maintain fire as they moved across their homelands.[5] Anthropologists, archaeologists and historians are now investigating the sophisticated fire management practices that were central to Aboriginal cultures across Australia. Oral histories, physical landscape assessment and European textual accounts, particularly those of early British settlers and explorers, have played a part in helping us to understand these behaviours at the time of settlement and, by extrapolation, to reconstruct pre-existing Indigenous practices.[6]

This article offers two new contributions to historical fire analysis. Firstly, it draws on detailed evidence about fire behaviours to be found within the records of the Dutch East India Company. VOC navigators charted the continent and recorded a range of fire behaviours, including smoke, campfires and ashes, as well as the use of firepower by Europeans. To date, this data has not been integrated into wider discussions about historic fire practices prior to the significant disruptions of European settlement. The use of colonial settler sources provides one way of thinking about fire management of the continent and European perceptions of the practices of Indigenous peoples, but are not the only sources available to us. The article thus offers new insights into European perceptions of the Australian continent and Aboriginal societies and cultures, by analysing European records of fire behaviour prior to British settlement.

Secondly, European texts are often used without much recognition of the precise contexts and preoccupations that shaped their interpretations of fire practices, the Europeans' own behaviours as well as what they perceived to be Indigenous ones. The capacity of such accounts to reveal what Aboriginal peoples were perceived to be doing with fires, as well as what Europeans were, depends upon recognising the particularities of European individuals who wrote these texts, the audiences they were written for and the mindsets that guided

5. Aboriginal fire practices vary according to the ecology and culture of their lands. As one example, traditional owners speak of wetland burning in the Kakadu National Park in a Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation [CSIRO] recording: 'Aboriginal Wetland Burning in Kakadu (2005)', available at https://youtu.be/AXG_2JSWoFA (accessed 31 Aug, 2020).

6. Hallam, *Fire and Hearth*; R.W. Braithwaite, 'Aboriginal Fire Regimes of Monsoonal Australia in the 19th Century', *Search*, xxii (1991), pp. 247–9; R.J. Fensham, 'Aboriginal Fire Regimes in Queensland: Analysis of the Explorers' Records', *Journal of Biogeography*, xxiv (1997), pp. 11–22; T. Vigilante, 'Analysis of Explorers' Records of Aboriginal Landscape Burning in the Kimberley Region of Western Australia', *Australian Geographic Studies*, xxxix (2001), pp. 135–55; N. Preece, 'Aboriginal Fires in Monsoonal Australia from Historical Accounts', *Journal of Biogeography,* xxix (2002), pp. 321–36, who notes (p. 331) that the principal purpose of these records was not to document Aboriginal burning practices and that those who gathered them did not enter into discussions with local peoples to understand their actions. Gammage, *Biggest Estate*; B. Pascoe, *Dark Emu: Black Seeds. Agriculture or Accident?* (Broome, WA, 2014).

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ehr/article/139/598-599/715/7726767 by guest on 04 October 2024

their interactions with the Australian continent. This is of course the expected basis of scholarly historical analysis, but for historical fire analysis, European accounts have in practice been commonly grouped together, or are distinguished only as explorer or settler texts. This elides significant differences between early modern Dutch, English and French communities of authorship, and between accounts that were written by very different individuals over an almost two-hundred-year period before settlement. Shino Konishi has recently called for a greater degree of nuance in the use of historical constructions of Indigenous societies, and particularly for recognition of 'the complexities and contradictions in eighteenth-century European accounts'.[7] This article employs a cultural history approach to evidence drawn from early European encounters with the Australian continent. It is alert to the language, discourses, genres and other contexts in which authors could conceptualise the land and the activities they 'saw' on it. It understands all early accounts as conclusions drawn from pre-existing assumptions about Australian peoples and the lands they inhabited, made in the particular contexts of their missions and of the readership for which their accounts were written. Prior research has established how significantly European assumptions shaped encounters and reports about Aboriginal peoples in broad terms. Although they do not make fire a focus of their research, Ann McGrath, Shino Konishi, Maria Nugent and Simon Ryan, among others, highlight how much the assumptions of later eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French and British observers shaped their interpretations of Aboriginal peoples.[8] Previous scholarship has likewise explored VOC account-keepers' interpretations of Aboriginal peoples' behaviours, feelings and suitability for trade interaction and Christian conversion, and the trajectory and impact within the VOC of their narratives of these experiences on the Australian continent.[9] Captains and crews thus responded to evidence of smoke and fire practices with a template of pre-conceived ideas.

Scholars are increasingly analysing the uncertainties and instabilities of power as it was experienced (and described) both in the global

7. S. Konishi, '"Wanton With Plenty": Questioning Ethno-historical Constructions of Sexual Savagery in Aboriginal Societies, 1788–1803', *Australian Historical Studies*, xxxix (2008), pp. 356–72, at 359.

8. A. McGrath, '"Modern Stone-Age Slavery": Images of Aboriginal Labour and Sexuality', *Labour History*, lxix (1995), pp. 30–51; S. Ryan, *The Cartographic Eye: How Explorers Saw Australia* (Cambridge, 1996); S. Konishi, *The Aboriginal Male in the Enlightenment World* (London, 2012); S. Konishi and M. Nugent, 'Newcomers, *c*.1600–1800', in A. Bashford and S. MacIntyre, eds, *The Cambridge History of Australia*, I: *Indigenous and Colonial Australia* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 43–67; S. Konishi, 'Discovering the Savage Senses: French and British Explorers' Encounters with Aboriginal People', in J. West-Scooby, ed., *Discovery and Empire: The French in the South Seas* (Adelaide, 2013), pp. 99–140.

9. S. Broomhall, 'Emotional Encounters: Indigenous Peoples in the Dutch East India Company's Interactions with the South Lands', *Australian Historical Studies*, xlv (2014), pp. 350–67; S. Broomhall, '"Quite Indifferent to These Things": The Role of Emotions and Conversion in the Dutch East India Company's Interactions with the South Lands', *Journal of Religious History*, xxxix (2015), pp. 524–44.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ehr/article/139/598-599/715/7726767 by guest on 04 October 2024

encounters of the Dutch Company and in Australian exploration and colonialism.[10] Power itself is now read through lenses of gender, emotion and environment, as well as race, which serve to enrich ways of understanding the fire analyses to be studied here.[11] European assessments of fire behaviours—as experiences and as records—are embedded in complicated power dynamics that are fundamental to their meaning. These dynamics may have been more complicated than the records want to reveal. Indigenous people held power in these exchanges, as Konishi has argued from her reading of the early nineteenth-century work of François Péron.[12] It is power that we see by reading *through* European-authored texts. As Michael Dodson has argued, constructions of Aboriginal peoples aimed principally to aid 'what the colonising culture wanted to say or think about itself'.[13] Knowledge, use and textual record of fire practices, this article argues, constituted a key form of power for Europeans, a site of invasion and a tool of violence.

The following sections analyse how VOC interpretations of fire practices on the Australian continent produced knowledge of people, resources and technologies, and revealed acts of European invasion and violence. The distinctiveness of these recorded fire behaviours is highlighted by their comparison with those chronicled in the accounts of the seventeenth-century English explorer William Dampier, as well as the works of the French explorers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This approach emphasises both the cumulative European perception of Aboriginal peoples and the unique interpretations and new acts of violence committed as part of these assessments. In focusing on the distinctions between different European groups, the article draws on examples from across the continent, but this is not intended to obscure the particularities of diverse socially and

10. S. Konishi, 'François Péron and the Tasmanians: An Unrequited Romance', in I. Macfarlane and M. Hannah, eds, *Transgressions: Critical Australian Indigenous Histories* (Canberra, 2007), pp. 1–18; T. Shellam, *Shaking Hands on the Fringe: Negotiating the Aboriginal World at King George's Sound* (Crawley, WA, 2009); S. Konishi, M. Nugent and T. Shellam, eds, *Indigenous Intermediaries: New Perspectives on Exploration Archives* (Canberra, 2015); T. Shellam, M. Nugent, S. Konishi and A. Cadzow, eds, *Brokers and Boundaries: Colonial Exploration in Indigenous Territory* (Canberra, 2016).

11. S. Konishi, 'Early Encounters in Aboriginal Place: The Role of Emotions in French Readings of Indigenous Sites', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, ii (2015), pp. 12–23; M. Nugent, 'Indigenous/European Encounters', in S. Broomhall, ed., *Early Modern Emotions: An Introduction* (London, 2017), pp. 406–9.

12. Konishi, 'François Péron and the Tasmanians', p. 15; S. Konishi, '"Inhabited by a Race of Formidable Giants": French Explorers, Aborigines, and the Endurance of the Fantastic in the Great South Land, 1803', *Australian Humanities Review*, xliv (2008), pp. 7–22, at 19; Konishi, *Aboriginal Male*, p. 19. See also B. Douglas, 'In the Event: Indigenous Countersigns and the Ethnohistory of Voyaging', in M. Jolly, S. Tcherkézoff and D. Tryon, eds, *Oceanic Encounters: Exchange, Desire, Violence* (Canberra, 2009), pp. 175–98.

13. M. Dodson, 'The Wentworth Lecture. The End in the Beginning: Re(de)finding Aboriginality', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, i (1994), pp. 2–13, at 8, also noted in C. Bracknell, 'The Emotional Business of Noongar Song', *Journal of Australian Studies*, xliv (2020), pp. 140–53.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ehr/article/139/598-599/715/7726767 by guest on 04 October 2024

culturally constituted Indigenous spaces and geographies, distinctions to which early modern Europeans were little alert.[14]

I

The Dutch East India Company recorded the first known European contact with the Australian continent in 1606, and for the next forty years, concluding with Abel Tasman's second voyage in 1644, it pursued a series of investigations aimed at revealing a landmass and peoples previously unknown to them. These voyages were coupled with accidental encounters with the continent, and rescue missions that sought to recover VOC crew and cargo.[15] By the end of the seventeenth century, the Company had some familiarity with all but the east coast of the continent. Here as elsewhere, the early European company was eager to acquire knowledge about resource management by local peoples, including water, potential crops for sustenance and medicinal purposes, exotic flora and fauna, trade opportunities and the susceptibility of Indigenous peoples to conversion to the Christian faith.[16] Fire has not yet featured as a focus of the scholarship. VOC records were

14. On Indigenous space as a site of resistance, see C. McKinnon, 'Indigenous Music as a Space of Resistance', in T.B. Mar and P. Edmonds, eds, *Making Settler Colonial Space: Perspectives on Race, Place and Identity* (London, 2010), pp. 255–72. This and other Indigenous analyses of place and space are discussed in S. Konishi, 'First Nations Scholars, Settler Colonial Studies, and Indigenous History', *Australian Historical Studies*, i (2019), pp. 285–304, at 293.

15. H. Edwards, *Islands of Angry Ghosts* (London, 1966); H. Edwards, *The Wreck on the Half-Moon Reef* (Sydney, 1975); G. Schilder, *Australia Unveiled: The Share of the Dutch Navigators in the Discovery of Australia*, tr. O. Richter (Amsterdam, 1976); J.P. Sigmond and L.H. Zuiderbaan, *Dutch Discoveries of Australia: Shipwrecks, Treasures and Early Voyages off the West Coast* (Adelaide, 1979); G. Schilder, 'New Holland: The Dutch Discoveries', in G. Williams and A. Frost, eds, *Terra Australis to Australia* (Melbourne, 1988), pp. 83–115; P. Playford, *Voyage of Discovery to Terra Australis by Willem de Vlamingh in 1696–97* (Perth, WA, 1998); J. Henderson, *Sent Forth a Dove: Discovery of the Duyfken* (Perth, WA, 1999); N. Peters, ed., *The Dutch Down Under, 1606–2006* (Perth, WA, 2006); C. Sheehan, 'Strangers and Servants of the Company: The United East India Company and the Dutch Voyages to Australia', and P. Sutton, 'Stories about Feeling: Dutch–Australian Contact in Cape York Peninsula, 1606–1756', in P. Veth, P. Sutton and M. Neale, eds, *Strangers on the Shore: Early Coastal Contacts with Australia* (Canberra, 2008), pp. 6–34, 35–59; G. Henderson, *Unfinished Voyages: Western Australian Shipwrecks, 1622–1850* (2nd edn, Perth, WA, 2007). For an Indigenous account of a VOC encounter, see J.S. Kartnin and P. Sutton, 'Dutchmen at Cape Keerweer: Wik-Ngatharra Story', in L. Hercus and P. Sutton, eds, *This Is What Happened: Historical Narratives by Aborigines* (Canberra, 1986), pp. 82–107.

16. L. Guelke and R. Shell, 'Landscape of Conquest: Frontier Water Alienation and Khoikhoi Strategies of Survival, 1652–1780', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, xviii (1992), pp. 803–24; R. Grove, 'Indigenous Knowledge and the Significance of South-West India for Portuguese and Dutch Constructions of Tropical Nature', *Modern Asian Studies*, xxx (1996), pp. 121–43; S. Huigen, J.L. de Jong and E. Kolfin, eds, *The Dutch Trading Companies as Knowledge Networks* (Leiden, 2010); S. Broomhall, '"Quite Indifferent to These Things"', pp. 524–44; R. Winters and J.P. Hume, 'Captive Birds on Dutch Mauritius: Bad-Tempered Parrots, Warty Pigeons and Notes on Other Native Animals', *Historical Biology*, xxviii (2016), pp. 812–22; T. Van Andel, J. Mazumdar, E.N.T. Barth and J.F. Veldkamp, 'Possible Rumphius Specimens Detected in Paul Hermann's Ceylon Herbarium (1672–1679) at Leiden, The Netherlands', *Blumea—Biodiversity, Evolution and Biogeography of Plants*, lxiii (2018), pp. 11–19; T. Van Andel, A. Scholma and M. Beumer, 'Icones Plantarum Malabaricarum: Early 18th Century Botanical Drawings of Medicinal Plants from Colonial Ceylon', *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*, ccxxii (2018), pp. 11–20.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ehr/article/139/598-599/715/7726767 by guest on 04 October 2024

critical to the decisions the directors made about activity in the region. Instructions and ships' logs, letters and petitions, daily registers and summative reports, among personnel in VOC outposts and sent to the central board of directors in Amsterdam: all had different purposes and audiences that affected how fire behaviours were perceived.[17] Moreover, these texts were produced in particular contexts, often in moments of heightened tensions, that shaped how fire and its by-products would be interpreted. They were documents designed to be read and circulated within the Company and formed part of its communicative rituals.[18] Fire and its by-products of smoke, ashes and gunfire became encoded with positive or negative meaning by Company men, with profound consequences for both Aboriginal and Company populations who inhabited the continent, willingly or otherwise.

Fire produced knowledge; indeed, fire was knowledge. First of all, fire and smoke were interpreted as evidence of human populations. For crews of VOC vessels, contact with local peoples was an essential part of their specific Instructions and of the wider mission to trade and potentially missionise. As Libby Robin has observed, fire 'is a mark of people in a landscape, and many of the early European explorers arriving by ship saw smoke before they saw land'.[19] In early August 1619, Frederick Houtman and Jacob d'Edel, in the *Dordrecht* and *Amsterdam* respectively, sailed up a considerable length of the western coast of the Australian continent. Encountering strong winds and heavy seas, Houtman concluded in his report upon his arrival in Batavia that 'this South-land, as far as we could judge, seems to be a very fair coast, but we found it impossible to land on it, nor have we seen any smoke or signs of inhabitants there; but further investigation is wanted on this point'.[20] The connection between smoke and human habitation that was implied in Houtman's account would be reinforced in subsequent VOC reports.

Thus, in 1623, when Jan Carstenszoon navigated a region on the northern Australian coast in the *Pera*, he and his crew perceived smoke as generated by human behaviour. Since assessing the possibilities for trade with any peoples numbered among the objectives of the mission, Carstenszoon used such signs for determining potential sites for landing

17. R. Guy, 'Calamitous Voyages: The Social Space of Shipwreck and Mutiny Narratives in the Dutch East India Company', *Itinerario*, xxxix (2015), pp. 117–40; S. Broomhall, 'Shipwrecks, Sorrow, Shame and the Great Southland: The Use of Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Dutch East India Company Communicative Ritual', in M.L. Bailey and K. Barclay, eds, *Emotion, Ritual and Power in Europe, 1200–1900: Family, State and Church* (Cham, 2017), pp. 83–102.

18. Broomhall, 'Shipwrecks'.

19. L. Robin, 'Australia in Global Environmental History', in J.R. McNeill and E.S. Mauldin, eds, *A Companion to Global Environmental History* (Chichester, 2012), pp. 182–95, at 189.

20. 'Dit Suijtlandt 't schijnt een seer bequaem lant te wesen soo wij sien conden; doch en conden niet aent lant comen noch en hebben geen roock oft teycken van volck vernoomen, evenwel dient naeder ondersocht': *Het Aandeel*, ed. Heeres, pp. 15–16 (Frederick Houtman, report, 7 Oct. 1619).

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ehr/article/139/598-599/715/7726767 by guest on 04 October 2024

and exploration. When, on 15 April 1623, near York Peninsula, he noted 'great volumes of smoke becoming visible on the land, the subcargo got orders to land with the two pinnaces, duly manned and armed, and was specially enjoined to use his utmost endeavours for the advantage of Our Masters'.[21] On this occasion, his attempts to make contact were thwarted, an experience that would often be repeated during his voyage. While the evidence of fire technology made clear a human presence, Carstenszoon was rarely able to view the people, who eluded his gaze. Via his log, Carstenszoon's experiences circulated through the Company's documentation, and his experiences, opinions and assumptions underpinned the expectations and goals of future missions.[22]

Some Dutch East India Company crews exploited Indigenous fire technologies in order to seek out resources on the land—most often water—that they considered, like the land itself, available for their consumption. When the Company's vessel *Batavia* struck what is now known as Morning Reef near Beacon Island in early June 1629, some forty of those aboard drowned. Commandeur François Pelsaert's journal documented his early searches to locate water for the survivors before he sailed north to seek help at the Company's regional headquarters in Batavia. In the process, Pelsaert described varying emotional states shaped by his analyses of smoke and ashes. On 14 June, Pelsaert and his crew ran alongside the continental coast, and 'in the afternoon seeing some smoke inland, rowed thither hoping to find an opportunity of landing. Were quite rejoiced for I imagined that where there were people there would also be fresh water'.[23] On the following day, a party headed to higher ground on the mainland where they found small holes collecting fresh rain water and surmised that 'the blacks had been there a little while before, for there lay bones of crabs and ashes of fires'.[24] For Pelsaert and his crew, smoke and ashes were promises of potential resources to manage their survival.

At least some VOC crew members appear to have linked fire practices to land management and cultivation. In 1658, a scouting crew from the *Emeloordt* went ashore looking for survivors from the *Vergulde Draeck*, which had been wrecked on the western coast of the Australian

21. 'aen landt overgrooten roock siende, is d'ondercoopman gecommandeert met beijde de schuijten, na behooren gemant ende gewapent, te landen; oock sonderlinge gerecommandeert alle diligentie aen te wenden ofter iets weerdich voor d'Heeren Mrs. wtgericht conde worden', 'Journael van Jan Carstensz. Op de ghedaene reyse van Nova Guinea' (1623), ed. L.C.D. van Dijk, *Twee togten naar de Golf van Carpentaria* (Amsterdam, 1859), p. 34; *Het Aandeel*, ed. Heeres, p. 36.

22. Broomhall, 'Emotional Encounters'.

23. 'Naar den middagh zagen wij roock op t landt, derhalven roijden der nae toe, om te zien offmender aan zoude konnen komen, zeer verblijt wesende, want ick presumeerden, sooder menschen waeren, datter oock water moste zijn': *De Schipbreuk van de Batavia, 1629*, ed. V.D. Roeper (Zutphen, 1993), p. 72; *The Batavia Journal of Francisco Pelsaert*, ed. and tr. M. van Huystee (Fremantle, WA, 1988), p. 6.

24. 'het scheen oock datter weijnich tijt te voorent zwarten geweest waeren, want daar lagen beenen van crabben, ende assche van vier': *Schipbreuk*, ed. Roeper, p. 73; *Batavia Journal*, ed. van Huystee, p. 6.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ehr/article/139/598-599/715/7726767 by guest on 04 October 2024

mainland in April 1656.[25] On its return to the ship, the scouting boat crew recounted how they had travelled some way inland where they had encountered huts and local people who had beckoned to them, but the crew had been wary to approach. They had seen many fires lit at night.[26] Significantly, the crew also claimed that they had come across 'in some places also cultivated land, which had been burned off'.[27] They evidently interpreted this as the work of local peoples, rather than signs of European industry by the shipwrecked survivors, distinguishing in the text between the 'we' of the crew who had found these sites and the 'they' who they perceived to have burned the land.

Furthermore, VOC crews appeared to interpret some smoke production as a deliberately hostile act by Aboriginal people to obscure themselves or their lands. Carstenszoon, for example, recorded that a 'violent landwind drove us off the land, so that we had to drop anchor in 3 fathom, the blacks on shore sending up such huge clouds of smoke from their fires that the land was hardly visible'.[28] Smoke and fire that Carstenszoon attributed to Indigenous peoples was to thwart his mission on these unknown lands in several ways.[29] Fire accorded these people a powerful capacity to declare their prior occupation of the territory he surveyed, without acquiescing to Company expectations that they make themselves known or engage in trade to the Company's benefit.

Aboriginal fire sites provided another opportunity for European knowledge-gathering. In a letter to the company directors in Amsterdam, the governor-general and Council of the Indies summarised Jacob Pietersz Peereboom's experiences travelling in the fluyt *Elburgh*, along the region north of Cape Leeuwin in 1658. Peereboom had encountered three men who left before they could be engaged by the VOC crew but, examining 'the spot where the blacks had been sitting, our men found a burning fire'.[30] They carefully assessed the items surrounding the fire. These included 'a number of assagays [assegais], together with three small hammers, consisting of a wooden handle to one end of which a hard pebble was fastened by means of a kind of wax or gum,

25. J. Henderson, *Marooned: The Wreck of the Vergulde Draeck and the Abandonment and Escape from the Southland of Abraham Leeman in 1658* (Perth, WA, 1985), pp. 88–9, places this encounter just south of present-day Jurien Bay.

26. The original manuscript log for the *Emeloordt* kept by skipper Aucke Pieter Jonck is digitised and available online with an English translation via *Digital Archive of Shipwreck Journals* (Western Australian Museum Online Collections), at https://museum.wa.gov.au/online-collections/journal/69898 [hereafter Emeloordt–Jonck]; entry for 11 Mar. 1658 at https://museum.wa.gov.au/online-collections/journal/emeloordt-2 (accessed 31 Aug. 2020). The original is in The Hague, Nationaalarchief, Ref: NL-HaNA 1.04.02 inv. no. 1225, fos 204–217.

27. 'wij hebben aen landt veel kreupel bos gevonden op eenige plaetsen mede zaijlandt dat sij afbranden op eenige plaetsen bou landt oft zaijlandt': Emeloordt–Jonck, 11 Mar. 1658.

28. 'overharde landelijcke wint van 't landt geraect, dies op 3 vaem geseth; ende de swerten maecten aen landt soo een overgrooten brandt ende smoock, dat men 't selve qualijck sien conde': 'Journael van Jan Carstensz', ed. van Dijk, p. 40; *Het Aandeel*, ed. Heeres, p. 38.

29. Broomhall, 'Emotional Encounters'.

30. 'op de plaets deer sy geseten hadden, lach een vuyr ende brande': *Het Aandeel*, ed. Heeres, p. 81.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ehr/article/139/598-599/715/7726767 by guest on 04 October 2024

the whole strong and heavy enough to knock out a man's brains'.[31] Dissecting the fire sites of Indigenous people revealed important information that could assist the Company in the future, and justify its own use of weaponry. The fearsome, deadly nature of Aboriginal weapons both reflected and produced a Company assumption that engagement with local peoples might occur as hostile combatants.

These accounts demonstrate that smoke, visible fire and fire sites made Company crews well aware of a pre-existing population on the Australian continent. In these forms, it gave VOC crews knowledge, however partial, about the existence of people, resources such as food and water, and weapons. Fire was a power and it was also to become a justification for violence. Increasingly, Company men employed indigenous fire practices against these populations. Fire was to become a site of invasion as crews demanded access to knowledge that Aboriginal people appeared not to want to give them.

As Abel Tasman surveyed the coast of what is now Tasmania, he documented what he perceived as local peoples' fire technologies. Tasman noted in his log what his crew had discovered while on shore, where they:

> had in several places observed numerous trees which had deep holes burnt into them at the upper end of the foot, while the earth had here and there been dug out with the fist so as to form a fireplace, the surrounding soil having become as hard as flint through the action of the fire.[32]

Despite these clear signs of prior occupation of the lands, Tasman proceeded to mark the areas he had encountered for the Company, by setting the flag of the Prince of Orange on a pole carved with the Company's mark there, so that 'those who shall come after us may become aware that we have been here, and have taken possession of the said land as our lawful property'.[33] To identify the location of this flag in the future, he made use of the Indigenous people's fire practices, recording that it stood at the centre of the bay 'near four tall trees easily recognisable and standing in the form of a crescent, exactly before the one standing lowest. This tree is burnt in just above the ground'.[34]

31. 'eenige hasegayen, mitsgaders 3 hamertjens, synde een houte steel ende aen 't eynde een harde steen, die met een soort van gom ofte lack aen de steel vastgemaeckt was, bequaem genoech om een mensch de cop met in te slaen': ibid., p. 81.

32. 'Dat op verscheijde plaetsen te Landewaert vele boomen gesien hadden welcken boven den voet der Zelver diep ingaende verbrant, d'aerde hier ende daer vuijstersche wijze gemaeckt, ende door 't vuerstoecken soo hert als steenen gebrant waren': *De Reizen van Abel Janszoon Tasman en Franchoys Jacobszoon Visscher ter nadere ontdekking van het Zuidland in 1642/3 en 1644*, ed. R.P. Meyjes ('s-Gravenhage, 1919), p. 33 (tr. J.E. Heeres, *Abel Janszoon Tasman's Journal* [Amsterdam, 1898], p. 15).

33. 'opdat de posterieur's blijcken mach, wij alhier geweest ende gemelte landt (tot beziet en eijgendom)': *De Reizen*, ed. Meyjes, p. 34 (tr. Heeres, p. 15).

34. 'van dese bochte vier hooge kennelijcke Boomen halff maenschijnse wijze staende, voorden laeghsten affgaende in d aerde oprechten; dezen boom is even boven de voet verbrant': *De Reizen*, ed. Meyjes, p. 34 (tr. Heeres, p. 16).

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ehr/article/139/598-599/715/7726767 by guest on 04 October 2024

Tasman left the flag as a memorial, he noted, both 'for those who shall come after us, and for the natives of this country, who did not show themselves, though we suspect some of them were at no great distance and closely watching our proceedings'.[35] Indeed, he continued to report on 'several columns of smoke ascend[ing] along the coast' as they left the area.[36] Successive VOC texts linked fire and smoke to Aboriginal presence, but Tasman empowered the Company by harnessing local fire practices and technologies to Company possession.

Fire practices on the continent might be employed to claim possession, but Aboriginal fire sites were also literally invaded by Europeans. Willem de Vlamingh's journey up the western coast in the Antipodean summer of 1696–7 was later summarised as failing to meet 'with any human beings, though now and then they have seen fires from afar, some of the men fancying that two or three times they have seen a number of naked blacks, whom however they have never been able to come near to, or to come to parley with'.[37] However, Vlamingh's crew used fire as a tool against local people who refused to offer themselves up for Company assessment. For a fortnight or so, his vessels scouted the coast near Derbarl Yerrigan (the waterway to which Vlamingh gave its modern English name, Swan River), while the crew had been reporting many signs of smoke nearby. The diarist from the *Nyptangh* recorded that members of the crew, having been sent to investigate inland on 5 January 1697:

> Determined to pass the night on shore, and pitched our camp in the wood, in a place where we found a fire which had been lighted by the inhabitants, but whom, nevertheless, we did not see. We fed the fire by throwing on wood, and each quarter of an hour four of our people kept watch.[38]

The crew consciously took over this Indigenous site, aware that this might provoke attack. On 11 January 1697, the boat crew proceeded down the river and inland where they found pools of fresh water and, further on, 'a fire which had been just lighted, and three small huts'.[39]

35. 'de posteriteijt ende d'Inwoonders dezes landts (welcke hun niet verthoonden, al hoe wel wij vermoeden eenige niet verre van daer ende op onse doen en laten met waeckende oogen waren)': *De Reizen*, ed. Meyjes, pp. 34–5 (tr. Heeres, p. 16).

36. 'Zagen langhs de custe heene veele roock van vueren opgaen': *De Reizen*, ed. Meyjes, p. 34 (tr. Heeres, p. 16).

37. 'eenige menschen te hebben ontmoet, maer wel nu en dan eenige vuuren, en soo sij oock mene 2 à 3 malen eenige swarte naecte menschen van verre gesien, dog die sij noyt hebben connen begaen, ofte spreken comen': *Het Aandeel*, ed. Heeres, p. 84. See also S. Broomhall, 'Encountering Karl: Willem de Vlamingh and the VOC on Noongar Boodjar', *Occasion*, xiii (2022), pp. 103–22.

38. 'Tegen den avond wierd een besluit genomen van dien nacht aan land te blyven; en sloegen wy ons neder in een Bosch, op een plaats daar wy een vuur door d'Inwoonders aangelegt vonden, die wy echter niet en zagen. 't Wierd gaande gehouden met hout by te smyten; terwyl ondertusschen alle quartier uurs vier Schildwachten wierden uitgezet', *Journaal wegens een voyagie, gedaan op order der Hollandsche Oost-Indische Maatschappy in de jaaren 1696 en 1697 door het hoekerscheepje de Nyptang, het schip de Geelvink, en het galjoot de Wezel, na het onbekende Zuid-land, en wyders na Batavia* (Amsterdam, 1701), p. 15 (tr. in R.H. Major, *Early Voyages to Terra Australis, Now Called Australia* [London, 1859], p. 123).

39. 'vonden wy een varsch aangelegt vuur, en drie Hutjes': *Journaal wegens een voyagie*, p. 16 (tr. Major, *Early Voyages*, p. 124).

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ehr/article/139/598-599/715/7726767 by guest on 04 October 2024

In these ways, smoke became a resource that the Company could use to gain crucial knowledge to advance its own position and to disempower local peoples, who were demonstrably unwilling to subject their existence to external scrutiny. Fire risked exposure and Aboriginal security. Company men used smoke to identify campsites that could provide additional resources of water, food or knowledge and even as ready-made fire sites and shelter points from which they could displace Indigenous peoples.

Progressively, the Company instrumentalised Indigenous smoke and fire as tools in pursuit of its ambitions. The VOC's aim to possess this new land, announced to local people as much as Europeans, employed Aboriginal fire technologies to gain key locations. Its personnel produced powerful knowledge about local peoples through assessments of their fire practices, while smoke and ashes revealed campsites that provided objects and information for European analysis. Thus, in part, the Company gained power, in European terms, through the use of what were perceived to be Indigenous fire technologies. In their own accounts, they documented taking from Aboriginal people what was not freely offered.

This knowledge of Indigenous fire behaviours, as the Company understood it, enabled European crews to distinguish it from their own employment of fire. Pelsaert's account is one among many Company records to indicate how its crews also employed fire technologies for their own communicative practices. He noted how the remaining crew left on the islands now termed the Houtman Abrolhos agreed a fire signal as they sought to explore surrounding islands for fresh water and supplies: 'with a given sign that if they found water, they would make 3 fires'.[40] He thus recorded how 'Wiebbe Haijes had been sent with a party of people to a long island, to seek water, which they found after a 20 days search, and therefore they made, according to plan, 3 fires as a signal'.[41] On his return from the Batavia settlement in the *Sardam* with help for the survivors, Pelsaert read 'smoke on a long island 2 miles west of the wreck, also on another small island close by the wreck' as communicating the presence of surviving crew, 'about which we were all very glad, hoping to find great numbers, or rather all people, alive'.[42] Pelsaert understood these fires as offering legible messages about the fate of the shipwrecked survivors. Because of 'the smoke that we saw rising up there', he went ashore to deliver supplies of bread, water and

40. 'soo zij water vonden, zouden-se 3 vuren maken': *Schipbreuk*, ed. Roeper, p. 207; *Batavia Journal*, ed. van Huystee, p. 94.

41. 'Wiebbe Haijes te vooren met partije volck naa een lanck eijlandt gesonden was om water te soecken, die het selve naar 20 dagen gesocht hebbende vondt, ende tot dien eynde volgens het desseijn 3 vieren tot een teecken maeckten': *Schipbreuk*, ed. Roeper, p. 87; *Batavia Journal*, ed. van Huystee, p. 14.

42. 'zagen wij roocken, op een lanck eijlant, 2 mijlen west van't wrack, waar over wij altsamen zeer verblijt waeren, verhopende goede partije, oft meest al de menschen int leven te vinden': *Schipbreuk*, ed. Roeper, p. 84; *Batavia Journal*, ed. van Huystee, p. 13.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ehr/article/139/598-599/715/7726767 by guest on 04 October 2024

wine, only to discover the terrible massacre that had occurred under the leadership of the merchant Jeronimus Cornelisz.[43]

Pelsaert sent the *Sardam* skipper, Jacob Jacopsz, to seek supplies still available from the reef wrecksite. When Jacopsz and his men did not return in the boat, Pelsaert resolved to pass by the mainland in order to locate the skipper and his men, for 'on the 4th of this month we have seen several smoke columns, wherefrom one can presume that they have made the same as a sign'.[44] He had, after all, just abandoned two men on the mainland as punishment, permitting them to attract any future Company vessel sailing in the area by giving 'suchlike signs as shall appear to be done with purpose, be it with smoke or otherwise'.[45] Thus, Pelsaert was primed to read some smoke as purposeful; that is, as signals from his crew. As such, he wrote of his joy when

> we noticed north east of us several columns of smoke, as well as the main coast of the Southland which we could see perfectly, on which this smoke was, though before this the land had been seen by none here. This makes me imagine and firmly believe that the skipper with his crew have been stranded with the boat on this land, and because it is clear weather have given smoke signals, so that I hope that we shall find them still alive by the grace of God.[46]

However, Pelsaert was to be disappointed. He concluded that the smoke 'had been made by the inhabitants who did not dare to show themselves'.[47] Further on, they again saw 'several smokes rising up, and were altogether gladdened that our own folk might be there'.[48] But this time, too, the footprints and footpaths 'with many smokes' that they found ultimately came to be attributed to the 'blacks [who] kept themselves hidden and did not show themselves to anyone'.[49]

Fire and smoke would later be expected to serve the Company again as rescue beacons and alert signals. When the *Vergulde Draeck* was wrecked in 1656, a group of its crew sailed north to Batavia in search of

43. 'door den roock die wij zagen op gaan': *Schipbreuk*, ed. Roeper, p. 97; *Batavia Journal*, ed. van Huystee, p. 20.

44. 'op den 4den deser verscheyde roocken gesien hebben, waaruijt te presumeren staat, dat zijlieden zulcx gedaan hebben, tot een teecken': *Schipbreuk*, ed. Roeper, p. 179; *Batavia Journal*, ed. van Huystee, p. 75.

45. 'datmen konde zien, dat hij met ernst gedaan wort, zoo met roocken, als andersints': *Schipbreuk*, ed. Roeper, p. 187; *Batavia Journal*, ed. van Huystee, p. 80.

46. 'wierden noortoost van ons verscheyde roocken gewaar, als mede vaste cust van't Zuydlandt, die wij perfect konden zien, daar desen roock op was, alhoewel het landt voor desen van niemant hier noch gesien is. Dit doet mij vastelijck geloven ende inbeelden, dat den schipper met sijn volck op dit landt, met den boot gestrant sijn, ende door het klaar weder roocktekens gedaan hebben, soo dat ick hope door de genade Godts, dat wijse noch int leven sullen vinden': *Schipbreuk*, ed. Roeper, p. 177; *Batavia Journal*, ed. van Huystee, p. 73.

47. 'waar uijt wij zagen dattet vande inwoonders geweewst waeren, die haar niet en dorsten vertoonen': *Schipbreuk*, ed. Roeper, pp. 192–3; *Batavia Journal*, ed. van Huystee, p. 84.

48. 'diversche roocken op gaan, ende alt'samen verblijt wesende dat ons volck daar mocht sijn': *Schipbreuk*, ed. Roeper, p. 193; *Batavia Journal*, ed. van Huystee, p. 84.

49. 'met menichte van roocken, dan de zwarten hielen haar verborgen, ende openbaarden hem niemant': *Schipbreuk*, ed. Roeper, p. 193; *Batavia Journal*, ed. van Huystee, p. 84.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ehr/article/139/598-599/715/7726767 by guest on 04 October 2024

assistance for the sixty-eight remaining survivors, whom they had left ashore. Over the next year, the governor-general and Council of the Indies and the governor at the Cape assigned three further ships, *Witte Valck*, *Goede Hoop* and *Vinck*, to seek out those left behind during 1656. Having all been unsuccessful (in fact, the *Hoop* left eleven further men on the shores during its searches), the *Emeloordt* and *Waeckende Boey* were then put to the task, both arriving in the assumed area of the wreck in early 1658. Their instructions made clear that they were expected to set fires upon the beach in various places, day and night, in hopes that *Draeck* survivors would head towards the smoke.[50]

Both vessels were to witness a number of fires and smoke signals during their voyages, requiring crews to determine their origins as either Indigenous or 'Christian'. In early March 1658, Aucke Pietersz Jonck, captain of the *Emeloordt*, began to report evidence of smoke along the coast: they 'immediately saw smoke rising in the E:S:E and also in the east which we were sure were signals'.[51] In the hope that these were signs from the Company's ship, the *Emeloordt*'s crew 'replied with three cannon shots and flew a large flag from the main topmast'.[52] The following morning, they saw another fire being lit ashore, 'to which we replied from the ship with three cannon shots whereupon they lit more'.[53] These apparently responsive acts buoyed the spirits of the crew as signs of deliberate communication. Thus, it was with 'rejoicing in our hearts we decided to send our boat there'.[54] However, 'the moment they reached the shore the smoke or the fire was extinguished'.[55] The sailors turned back in order to reach the *Emeloordt* before nightfall. Jonck concluded that there was cunning to these fires: 'I suspect that this fire is no honest work for it was lit a good 2 miles from the other one and was extinguished at once'.[56] For VOC crews, the setting and extinguishing of such fires were considered as malicious fire practices by Aboriginal people designed to confound them.

Christian fires, by contrast, could be discerned because they would be created in response to European firepower. The captain of the *Waeckende Boey*, Samuel Volckertszoon, had sent ashore fourteen crew led by the upper steersman, Abraham Leeman, to search the vicinity. Difficult weather had forced the boat to remain on land overnight, but

50. Henderson, *Marooned*, pp. 62–3.

51. 'en sagen mede roock opgaen in het oost Z:O: en mede in het oosten alwaer wij op vast betrouden dat tot seijn deden': Emeloordt–Jonck, at http://museum.wa.gov.au/online-collections/journal/emeloordt-20.

52. 'hebben haer geantwoort met 3 schooten van ons canon en een groote vlagh van de groote stengh laten waijen': ibid.

53. 'waer op wij uijt het schip met 3 kanon schooten antwoorden waer op sij doen meerder maeckten': ibid.

54. 'ons hert verblijdt zijnde hebben goet gevonden onsen boot aldaer na toe te senden': ibid.

55. 'met dat sij tegen den wal quamen worde den roock ofte het vier geblust': Emeloordt–Jonck, at http://museum.wa.gov.au/online-collections/content/emeloordt-17.

56. 'ick betrouwe dat dit vier geen opvechtwerck en is want het wel 2 mijlen vanden den anderen wert opgesteecken en ter stondt weder ophout': ibid.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ehr/article/139/598-599/715/7726767 by guest on 04 October 2024

in the morning, the *Waeckende Boey* had not returned for them. It was to be Leeman's second abandonment on the western coast, for he had earlier been on the ill-fated *Draeck*. Volckertszoon's log shows that his crew had seen several fires just after Leeman's boat had been lost. On 28 March, he recorded that '[a]t dusk, we saw a fire close to the shore, hoped it was lit by Christian people, either the *Draeck*'s or the *Hoop*'s, since we had never observed such a fire. And so we fired a cannon, whereupon another fire close to the other was seen'.[57] However, the crew were unable to investigate further because they lacked a boat. By the next morning, they were not only further offshore 'but far to the north of where we had seen the fire'.[58] Volckertszoon turned to the north and sailed for Batavia.

The impact of Volckertszoon's decision to ignore the fires he had seen is known to us through the diary of Abraham Leeman, for, at the same time, Leeman and his men were watching their ship sail away. On the evening of 28 March:

> the man who was on the lookout cried suddenly 'A sail, a sail!' Then we ran up the hill together, and I saw that this was true; had a fire lit at once, and set fire to a great many bushes so that it seemed that the entire island was on fire. I was glad as if we had found a new life. I had a great deal of wood brought to an elevation away from that fire, so that in case they should fire a gun we could light it, so that they would notice that there were Christians.[59]

Leeman assumed that his manipulation of fire in such a way would make it obvious to the crew that these were actions of Company men rather than of local peoples, and that thus identified, help would follow. Indeed, Leeman and his men were excited when they heard a gun fired and saw flame:

> We then at once lit all the wood that I had had collected, so that it was a terribly big fire, and our men walked along the beach with large pieces of burning wood in order to be seen … I divided the crew into two groups,

57. 'met doncker avont sagen een vier dicht aende zeecant, vertrouwen 't selve van Christenmenschen, 't sij draecx ofte hoops volck gestoockt wiert alsoo nooit diergelyck view vernomen hadden, waer door een Canon losten, waertegen terstont noch een ander vier dich bij malcander gesien wiert': The Hague, Nationaalarchief, 1.04.02, Inventaris van het archief van de VOC, no. 1225, available online via https://www.nationaalarchief.nl/onderzoeken/archief/1.04.02/invnr/1225/, Samuel Volkertszoon, Journal, fos 218–227, at 226v (accessed 22 Dec. 2023) (tr. Henderson, *Marooned*, p. 106).

58. 'maer veer benoorden daer 't vier gesien hadden', Volckertszoon, Journal, fo. 227r (tr. Henderson, *Marooned*, p. 107).

59. 'Zonsonderganck riep de man, die den uytkijck hadde, een zeyl, een zeyl, liepen datelyck met alle man naer boven, en ick sagh het selffs, liet doen terstont vier stoocken en staacken een hoop ruyghte inde brant, dat het leeck off het heele eylant inde brant was, elck was soo verblijt off zy een nieu leven gevonden hadden. Ick liet op een hooge plaets van dat vier aff, een groot parthij hout brengen om off hy schieten mochte, souden wij dat dan inde brant steecken, op dat zij bemercken mogen, dat daar Christen menschen waeren', Nationaalarchief, 1.04.02, no. 1225, Abraham Leeman, Journal, fos 229–252, at 237v; (accessed 22 Dec. 2023); Samuel Pierre L'Honoré Naber, ed., 'In een open sloep van Australie naar Java', *Marineblad* (1910–1911), pp. 19–36 (tr. in C. de Heer, 'My Shield and My Faith', *Westerly*, i (1963), pp. 33–46, at 40).

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ehr/article/139/598-599/715/7726767 by guest on 04 October 2024

> had each group watch half the night and kept fires burning steadily until daylight.[60]

But in the morning, no one could see the ship. Leeman realised that they had been abandoned and that hopes invested in the power of fire to effect their recovery were misplaced. By 10 April, things seemed worse still after they lost their flint. Being thus unable to control fire themselves, Leeman resolved to navigate the little boat with makeshift sealskin sails to Batavia, a harrowing voyage of some five months that only he and three other men survived.

The governor-general and councillors wrote to the directors at the end of that year that they no longer held out hope for the survivors of the *Draeck*, since they had not revealed themselves through any signs, including fire, during the time the Company's ships were scouting the vicinity.[61] Survival management through fire remained, however, an important recourse for Company crews becoming unwilling inhabitants of the Southland. The ultimate fate of those on the *Zuytdorp*, which in 1712 crashed on the Western Australian cliffs that now bear its name, is unknown. However, archaeological evidence from the top of the cliffs near the wreck indicates the remains of large bonfires. Burnt remains include European artefacts of the period such as barrel rings, brass hinges and clasps, indicating items such as wooden chests and barrels were used to create a large fire—one designed not for warmth, but to attract the attention of any passing ships.[62]

Distinguishing potentially Christian fires from Indigenous smoke required being able to identify the purposeful and responsive nature of blazes. Fire behaviour that could not be read in these terms was assumed to be work of Aboriginal people, acting maliciously rather than innocently, it seemed, to deny the Company its chance to recover its property and people. Tellingly, then, the sound of fire from muskets and cannons was assumed to produce very different responses from European and Indigenous listeners. Musket fire between VOC ships served as a means of communication between vessels, as with the *Wesel* and *Cleen Amsterdam* in 1636:

> As we were setting our foresail, a musket-shot was fired from the Yacht *Wesel*, upon which we dropped our other anchor again; when towards the evening the weather had somewhat improved, we sent our orangbay [ship's

60. 'Daar op wij datelyck al 't hout dat by malcanderen had laeten leggen, soo dat het een geweldich groot vier was, en het volck liep met groote stucken brandent hout, langes strant op en need, om gesien te worden ... Ick verdeelde het volck in twee deelen, liet elck deel de halve nacht waecken, en gestadigh vieren tot den dagh toe', Leeman, Journal, fos 237v–238r (tr. Heer, 'My Shield', p. 40).

61. J. Green, L. Zeiderbaan, R. Sténuit, S.J. Wilson and M. Owens, *The Loss of the Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie Jacht 'Vergulde Draeck', Western Australia 1656*, Part I (British Archaeological Reports, International Series, 36; Oxford, 1977), p. 59.

62. G. Henderson, *Unfinished Voyages: Western Australian Shipwrecks, 1622–1850* (2nd edn, Crawley, WA, 2007), p. 47.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ehr/article/139/598-599/715/7726767 by guest on 04 October 2024

tender] to the *Wesel*, to learn the meaning of the musket-shot; when the men returned, they informed us that the *Wesel* had also lost an anchor.[63]

However, VOC crews also regularly used firepower to control encounters with Aboriginal people whom they perceived to be threatening. In early May 1623, in the Cape York region, the crew of the *Pera* had several encounters with local men. Carstenszoon recorded explicitly that 'in order to frighten them, a musket was accordingly fired, upon which the blacks fled and retreated into the wood'.[64] The following day, he located 'numerous footprints of men and dogs' and so 'spent some time there, following the footprints aforesaid to the river, where we gathered excellent vegetables or pot-herbs'.[65] Carstenszoon gave the river the name Coen, after the Batavian governor-general. After this theft of local resources, armed Aboriginal men emerged, one of whom was captured with a noose around his neck. The others, Carstenszoon recorded, attempted 'to rescue their captured brother', but 'in defending ourselves we shot one of them'.[66] More than a century later, firepower was still the ready response of VOC crews to Indigenous defensive behaviours. The last VOC expedition to chart the Southland, in 1756, saw the *Rijder* and *Buis* come into the Gulf of Carpentaria (named after Governor-General Pieter de Carpentier). On 15 June, the crew fired a shot at five women and eleven men, who were armed with assegais, and 'who directly tried to take our men's hats off their heads', capturing one young man as the others fled.[67]

What then can we learn from VOC interpretation and use of fire practices on the Australian continent? Some assessments were made by crews instructed to find and contact Aboriginal peoples, negotiate potential trading partners, and chart and claim lands on behalf of the Company. Others were accounts explaining actions and decisions designed to locate and bring back survivors from wrecked Company vessels. To interpret fire, Company men had to determine its makers, discern its purposes and decipher its messages for them. These motivations provide critical contextualisation of what fires meant emotionally, culturally and politically for VOC crews as they experienced

63. 'Onse fock bymaeckende, schoot het jacht Wesel een schoot met musquet, waerover ons ander ancker weder lieten vallen; tegens den avont beter weer synde, sonden onse orangbay aen Wesel, om te vernemen, wat het schieten beduyden wederoome comende verstondt dat syluyden mede een ancker verlooren hadde': *Het Aandeel*, ed. Heeres, p. 69.

64. 'ende soo de Corporaal met een schoot haer verveert meende te maken sijn alle beijde geraect ende daer aff gestorven; dies voorts naer boort geroeijt': 'Journael van Jan Carstensz', ed. van Dijk, p. 21; *Het Aandeel*, ed. Heeres, p. 28.

65. 'daer veel voetstappen van menschen ende spoor van honden', 'dies daer een tijt lanck getardeert ende de voorschr. stappen gevolcht tot aen een revier, daer seer delicate saijer, ofte wermoes gepluct wort': 'Journael van Jan Carstensz', ed. van Dijk, p. 43; *Het Aandeel*, ed. Heeres, p. 40.

66. 'de ander dit siende hebben de gevatte willen assisteren ende met haer assagaijen furieuselijck geworpen', 'soo dat in onse diffentie eene van haer doot geschoten is ende d'ander gevlucht': 'Journael van Jan Carstensz', ed. van Dijk, p. 44; *Het Aandeel*, ed. Heeres, p. 40.

67. 'en haar op stonds de hoeden van 't hooft wilde neemen': *Het Aandeel*, ed. Heeres, p. 97.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ehr/article/139/598-599/715/7726767 by guest on 04 October 2024

and employed fire on the Southland continent during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. To secure power and legitimate authority in its own eyes over uncertain landscapes, unknown peoples and unaccounted-for personnel, the Company's capacity to make meaning from fires was crucial. Fire was knowledge—of people with whom they wanted to trade or whom they wanted to convert, of their resources and of their technologies, particularly their weaponry. Fire was power—a justification for violence, a site of invasion and something that could be harnessed for European possession. Fire communicated distinctiveness, in its use as blazes and gunfire, marking a boundary between Christian Europeans to be rescued and Indigenous peoples to be controlled.

II

Comparison of perceptions of fire practices in VOC records with other early modern sources can help us to see their particular features and interpretative meanings. The English explorer and sometime buccaneer William Dampier made two voyages on which he encountered the Australian continent. In 1688, aboard the *Cygnet*, he remained for several months in the north-west region now known as King Sound for repairs to his vessel, and he returned in 1699, exploring the mid- to north-western coast of the continent, commissioned by King William III who provided the warship *Roebuck*.[68] On both expeditions, Dampier recorded fire practices. These were not expeditions to locate lost colleagues in a shared corporate body, or to advance that Company's aims, as was the case with the VOC texts. His were sponsored explorations that aimed at advancing natural philosophical interests in botanical discovery and ethnographic study as these were understood at the time, and whose immediate focus in the Australian continent was a search for resources to support the crew. His assessment of local fire behaviours often drew equivalences with practices he had perceived elsewhere around the globe: 'How they get their Fire, I know not: but, probably, as *Indians* do, out of Wood. I have seen the *Indians* of *Bon-Airy* do it, and have my self tryed the experiment'.[69] Dampier was well aware of previous VOC accounts of the area, regularly comparing his charting to Tasman's description of the region. Unlike the VOC accounts, however, Dampier's interpretations of his experiences on both voyages, which included dramatic and overwhelmingly negative conclusions about Indigenous peoples with whom he interacted, were intended for publication and a broad audience.

68. C. Wilkinson, *William Dampier* (London, 1929); D. Preston and M. Preston, *A Pirate of Exquisite Mind: The Life of William Dampier, Explorer, Naturalist, and Buccaneer* (New York, 2004); A. Mitchell, *Dampier's Monkey: The South Seas Voyages of William Dampier* (Adelaide, 2010).

69. William Dampier, *A New Voyage Round the World* (London, 1697), p. 466.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ehr/article/139/598-599/715/7726767 by guest on 04 October 2024

Dampier equated the smoke that he saw on the islands and mainland of the continent with the prospect of resources that he required, especially fresh water and possible sources of food. On his second voyage, he recorded: 'We saw a Smoak on an Island 3 or 4 Leagues off; … 'T was probable that on the Island where the Smoak was there was Inhabitants, and fresh Water for them'.[70] However, the longer time that he spent ashore in the north-west allowed him more opportunity than most of the VOC expeditions to assess the centrality of fire management to Aboriginal lifestyles. Upon first arriving, Dampier sought for houses: 'We searched afterwards 3 days, in hopes to find their Houses; but found none: yet we saw many places where they had made Fires'.[71] He soon concluded that 'their place of dwelling was only a Fire, with a few Boughs before it, set up on that side the wind was of'.[72] This conclusion was reinforced in his mind on his second expedition: 'We saw a great many places where they had made Fires, and where there were commonly 3 or 4 Boughs stuck up to Windward of them'.[73]

Fire, he thus surmised, was central to group activities, the site around which communities gathered and shared resources. In a manuscript account of his first voyage, he wrote on the theme at some length:

> all that are of age to search those wares goe downe at the time of Low water, leaving only the old sicke weake people and children at home, who make a fire against the Coming of their friends to broyle their fish, which they soone devoure without salt or bread.[74]

In print, a shortened version related that 'what Providence has bestowed on them, they presently broil on the Coals and eat it in common'.[75] Such hearths could be examined for knowledge of food supplies: 'By their Fire-places we should always find great heaps of Fish-shells of several sorts; and 'tis probable that these poor Creatures here lived chiefly on the Shell-fish, as those I before describ'd did on small Fish'.[76] Moreover, hearths could be used to assert power over local peoples. Dampier invaded such campsites, understanding them to be central to Indigenous social practice. He even registered the deep concerns and fears of local peoples as his crew deliberately walked into what he described as 'their place of dwelling':

> they were much disordered at our Landing, especially the Women and Children: for we went directly to their Camp. … Some of the Women, and such People as could not go from us, lay still by a Fire, making a doleful noise as if we had been coming to devour them.[77]

70. William Dampier, *A Voyage to New Holland, &c. In the Year 1699* (London, 1703), p. 139.

71. Dampier, *A New Voyage*, p. 467.

72. Ibid.

73. Dampier, *A Voyage to New Holland*, p. 148.

74. London, British Library, Sloane MS 3236, 'The Adventures of William Dampier', fo. 221v, reproduced in Mitchell, *Dampier's Monkey*, p. 521.

75. Dampier, *A New Voyage*, p. 465.

76. Dampier, *A Voyage to New Holland*, p. 148.

77. Dampier, *A New Voyage*, p. 467.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ehr/article/139/598-599/715/7726767 by guest on 04 October 2024

Recognising the centrality of fires in community experience, Dampier explicitly disrupted the lives of Aboriginal peoples for his own aims.

Dampier also perceived fire-assisted technologies being applied to manage land and to construct weaponry. On his second voyage, he interpreted smoke and burned vegetation as human interventions: 'We saw a Smoak on an Island 3 or 4 Leagues off, and here also the Bushes had been burned, but we found no other sign of Inhabitants'.[78] Furthermore, he paid close attention to Indigenous arms, noting that the 'Lance is a long strait pole, sharp at one end, and hardened afterwards by heat'.[79] Fire made Indigenous weapons powerful, he suggested: they 'have for armes a lance sharpned at one end and burned in the fire to harden it'.[80] Dampier's assessment implied that these spears were a dangerous threat to Europeans. As such, defensive fire actions of their own might be warranted. When his crew came across a group of about forty individuals, women and men of all ages, he recorded that the '[m]en, at our first coming ashore, threatened us with their Lances and Swords; but they were frighted by firing one Gun, which we fired purposely to scare them'.[81] On his second voyage, Dampier suggested that Aboriginal habituation to the noise of European firearms justified a more violent employment of firepower. When his crew encountered a group of local men, Dampier recorded: 'I discharg'd my Gun to scare them, but avoided shooting any of them'.[82] However, finding a crew member

> in great danger from them, and my self in some; and that tho' the Gun had a little frighted them at first, yet they had soon learnt to despise it, tossing up their Hands and crying *Pooh*, *Pooh*, *Pooh*; and coming on afresh with a great Noise, I thought it high time to charge again and shoot one of them, which I did.[83]

This action allowed his crew to break free, Dampier insisting in his account that he ordered his men to 'attempt the Natives no farther, being very sorry for what had happened already'.[84] He documented the status of the Indigenous man that he had shot as 'wounded'.[85]

Dampier's account of Aboriginal fire practices mirrored some of the assumptions embedded in VOC texts. Indeed, this is hardly surprising, given that Dampier was aware of earlier Company descriptions of the Australian continent. However, his longer residence enabled more detailed interpretations of the significance of fire to Indigenous lives, in their social practices, their land use and their weaponry. These

78. Dampier, *A Voyage to New Holland*, p. 139.

79. Dampier, *A New Voyage*, p. 466.

80. British Library, Sloane MS 3236, 'The Adventures of William Dampier', fo. 222r, reproduced in Mitchell, *Dampier's Monkey*, p. 522.

81. Dampier, *A New Voyage*, p. 467.

82. Dampier, *A Voyage to New Holland*, p. 146.

83. Ibid.

84. Ibid, p. 147.

85. Ibid.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ehr/article/139/598-599/715/7726767 by guest on 04 October 2024

understandings gave heightened meaning, if not cultural respect, to local firesites as a means to ascertain knowledge of Indigenous experience. At the same time, European use of firepower was now warranted because of the increased esteem for the violent efficacy of Indigenous fire-hardened spears. Dampier suggested that there was no difference in how Indigenous and Europeans responded to the sound of gunfire: he perceived that Aboriginal people had quickly learned to dismiss the auditory power of musketry, and argued that this justified aiming European firepower directly at Aboriginal peoples.

III

By the end of the eighteenth century, other European nations had ventured into the contested space of Southland. British and French rivalries in the region have been well studied, as too have their assessments of Indigenous peoples as they explored and (in the case of the British) created permanent settlements on the continent. Historians have examined the ethnographic and anthropological assumptions, and the diverse constraints of the genres of voyage narrative, administrative reports and letters, that informed their varied interpretation of Aboriginal behaviours.[86] Fire has not to date been an aspect examined in depth in these historical analyses, although, as noted above, British and French accounts have been used in historical environmental studies to make inferences about Indigenous fire practices prior to, or at the time of, British settlement.

The following brief analysis emphasises distinctive elements in the accounts of French explorers, recording fire behaviours in what was perceived to be a rapidly changing context for Aboriginal peoples. It focuses on the first volume of *Voyage de découvertes aux terres australes*

86. In addition to works cited above, see M. Sankey, 'François-Auguste Péron: Le mythe de l'homme sauvage et l'écriture de la science', *Cahiers de Sociologie Économique et Culturelle* (1988), pp. 37–46; M. Hughes, 'Philosophical Travellers at the Ends of the Earth: Baudin, Péron and the Tasmanians', in R.W. Home, ed., *Australian Science in the Making* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 23–44; B. Douglas, 'Seaborne Ethnography and the Natural History of Man', *Journal of Pacific History*, xxxviii (2003), pp. 3–17; B. Douglas, 'Slippery Word, Ambiguous Praxis: "Race" and Late-18th-Century Voyagers in Oceania', *Journal of Pacific History*, xxxxi (2006), pp. 1–29; B. Douglas and C. Ballard, *Foreign Bodies: Oceania and the Science of Race, 1750–1940* (Canberra, 2008); B. Douglas, 'L'idée de "race" et l'expérience sur le terrain au XIXe siècle: Science, action indigène et vacillations d'un naturaliste français en Océanie', *Revue d'Histoire des Sciences Humaines*, xxi (2009), pp. 175–209; N. Starbuck, '"Primitive Race", "Pure Race", "Brown Race", "Every Race": Louis Freycinet's Understanding of Human Difference in Oceania', in J. West-Sooby, ed., *Discovery and Empire: The French in the South Seas* (Adelaide, 2013), pp. 215–44; N. Starbuck, 'Neither Civilized nor Savage: The Aborigines of Colonial Port Jackson, through French Eyes, 1802', in A. Cook, N. Curthoys and S. Konishi, eds, *Representing Humanity in the Age of Enlightenment* (London, 2013), pp. 123–33; N. Starbuck, 'Colonial Vision: French Voyager-artists, Aboriginal Subjects and the British Colony at Port Jackson', in N. Edwards, B. McCann and P. Poiana, eds, *Framing French Culture* (Adelaide, 2015), pp. 29–52; T. Shellam, 'Ethnographic Inquiry on Phillip Parker King's Hydrographic Survey', in M. Thomas and M. Harris, eds, *Expeditionary Anthropology: Teamwork, Travel and the 'Science of Man'* (New York, 2018), pp. 205–32.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ehr/article/139/598-599/715/7726767 by guest on 04 October 2024

(1807), the official published account of the 1801–3 French expedition captained by Nicolas Baudin on the *Géographe* and Jacques Hamelin on the *Naturaliste*.[87] This work was primarily produced by François Péron, but embedded within it were accounts by Louis de Freycinet and others. Péron had commenced the expedition as a young student zoologist, but the loss of his more senior colleagues left him in charge of documenting the mission for posterity. Miranda Hughes, among others, has argued that Péron's account bears little resemblance to modern anthropological analysis, and 'differs little, methodologically, from the literature of popular travellers' tales'.[88] Konishi has noted that, in regard to his assessment of Indigenous people, Péron 'is indeed a treasure trove of objectionable quotations'.[89] Péron's approach was influenced by the philosopher and jurist Joseph-Marie Degérando, who wrote the expedition's instructions for ethnographic observation.[90] This, rather than the securing of resources or the location of communities with whom to trade or discuss Christian faith, shaped the context of Péron's record of Aboriginal fire practices. Degérando suggested that the expedition seek to understand how Aboriginal peoples built their dwellings, made their clothes, their tools, their experience of the senses, and their use of fire. With regard to the latter, he commented:

> As for fire, ignorance of it attests without doubt a state furthest removed from civilization, and it is unnecessary to recommend explorers to obtain this benefit for them. But even those tribes which use fire do not know all its effects; and this it would be quite interesting to examine.[91]

Additionally, Péron himself opened the *Voyage de Découvertes* by presenting the crew's experiences as the latest in a long line of hostile encounters with this continent, in which he listed Dampier, Vlamingh and Pelsaert among others as those who had preceded the French:

> no country, in effect, has shown itself, until today, more difficult to reconnoitre than New Holland, and all the great expeditions that have been made there have been marked by setbacks, or very fruitless attempts.[92]

87. F. Horner, *The French Reconnaissance: Baudin in Australia, 1801–1803* (Melbourne, 1987); J. Fornasiero, P. Monteath and J. West-Sooby, *Encountering Terra Australis: The Australian Voyages of Nicolas Baudin and Matthew Flinders* (2nd edn, Adelaide, 2010); N. Starbuck, *Baudin, Napoleon and the Exploration of Australia* (London, 2013).

88. Hughes, 'Philosophical Travellers', p. 36.

89. Konishi, 'François Péron and the Tasmanians', p. 1, and see further discussion in Konishi, 'Discovering the Savage Senses: French and British Explorers' Encounters with Aboriginal People', in West-Sooby, ed., *Discovery and Empire*, pp. 99–140.

90. See also P. Gibbard, 'Empiricism and Sensibility in the Australasian Journal of Théodore Leschenault de la Tour (1800–1803)', in R. Garrod and P.J. Smith, eds, *Natural History in Early Modern France: The Poetics of an Epistemic Genre* (Leiden, 2018), pp. 263–90.

91. Joseph-Marie Degérando, *The Observation of Savage Peoples*, tr. F.C.T. Moore (Berkeley, CA, 1969), p. 96. See further discussion of Degérando in Starbuck, 'Neither Civilized or Savage,' pp. 123–4.

92. 'nul pays, en effet, ne s'est montré, jusqu'à ce jour, plus difficile à reconnoître que la Nouvelle-Hollande, et toutes les grandes navigations qui y ont été faites, ont été marquées par des

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ehr/article/139/598-599/715/7726767 by guest on 04 October 2024

With these accounts and experiences shaping his perspective, Péron recorded his own assessments.

Like Dampier and the authors of the VOC texts, Péron sought out Indigenous fires to secure knowledge of food resources and cooking techniques, and to locate the whereabouts of peoples. Thus, as they approached the area of the southern coast now known as Cape Leeuwin in 1801:

> Until then, we had not been able to distinguish, on these sad coasts, any trace of habitation; but that very evening, a great fire, which suddenly appeared beyond the dunes, told us that the human species counted here some of its savage hordes.[93]

It was hardly a promising beginning. In the days to come, Péron found few people but 'everywhere a great quantity of burned trees, extinguished fires'.[94] From the traces of previously extinguished fires, he was able to discover 'that in their ashes were remains of fish, kangaroos and black swan beaks'.[95] By contrast, near what is now Dirk Hartog Island on the mid-west coast, 'around various extinguished fires' were 'a lot of debris of shells and fish, but no quadruped bones, which leads me to believe that the inhabitants of this part of the coast draw their main nourishment from the sea'.[96] The French were also able to employ what they read as Indigenous-produced smoke in their coastal navigation. Having sailed close to the land, 'at ten o'clock in the evening, the appearance of a large fire on the coast alerted us to all the danger we ran'.[97] Once more, fires perceived to be created by Aboriginal peoples established knowledge for Europeans. The French also employed fire to communicate with their own vessels, as had previous European crews. As they awaited the arrival of their ship, the crew members ashore decided to 'reach a sand dune higher than the others and light a large fire there, to indicate to the vessels the position in which we found ourselves'.[98] In a more positive experience than that of Abraham Leeman 150 years

revers ou par des tentatives impuissantes': F. Péron, *Voyage de découvertes aux terres australes*, I (Paris, 1807), p. 7; my translations from French unless otherwise stated.

93. 'Jusqu'alors, nous n'avions pu distinguer, sur ces tristes bords, aucune trace d'habitation; mais ce soir-là même, un grant feu, qui parut tout-à-coup au-delà des dunes, nous apprit que l'espèce humaine comptoit ici quelques-unes de ses hordes sauvages': ibid., p. 69.

94. 'En revanche, je trouyois par-tout une grande quantité d'arbres brûlés, de feux éteints': ibid., pp. 78–9.

95. 'on observoit les traces de feux précédemment éteints; que dans leurs cendres il se trouvoit plusieurs débris de poissons, de kanguroos et quelque becs de cygnes noirs': ibid., p. 82.

96. 'Autour de divers feux éteints, nous vîmes beaucoupe de débris de coquillages et de poissons, mais point d'ossemens de quadrupède; ce qui me porte à croire que les habitans de cette partie de la côte tirent de la mer leur nourriture principale': ibid., p. 196.

97. 'sur le dix heures du soir, l'apparition d'un gros feu sur la côte vint nous avertir de tout le danger que nous courons': ibid., p. 134.

98. 'gagner une dune de sable plus élevée que les autres, et d'y allumer un grand feu, pour indiquer aux vaisseaux la position dans laquelle nous nous trouvions': ibid., p. 94.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ehr/article/139/598-599/715/7726767 by guest on 04 October 2024

earlier, 'soon it [the ship] fired a few cannon shots the noise of which resounded in the depths of all our hearts'.[99]

In contrast to previous authors, however, Péron also reported witnessing fires on a massive scale that he found truly frightening.

> On these less sterile shores, there appeared more numerous tribes of inhabitants, if we can at least judge by the multiplicity of fires on the coast, and by their development, one would have said that some were of many forests ablaze.[100]

These fires, perceived to have been lit by Indigenous peoples, constituted in Péron's view destructive violence to lands, as he recorded regarding one experience in Tasmania: 'From all sides rose black swirls of smoke; on all sides the forests were on fire … The spectacle was horrible: the flame had destroyed all the herbaceous vegetation'.[101] Despite repeated reports of fire practices, Péron could still describe fires lit by Aboriginal peoples as essentially purposeless:

> In every direction immense columns of flame and smoke; all the opposite side of the mountain … was burning for an extent of several leagues. Thus were destroyed these ancient and venerable forests, which the scythe of time had respected over many centuries, only to deliver them more intact to the destructive instinct of their fierce inhabitants.[102]

The crew of the *Naturaliste* in 1802, as it charted the southern coast of the continent, speculated that 'To warm themselves, or perhaps only as an effect of their indifference, they light in the woods the most disastrous fires'.[103] In such accounts, local peoples were represented as lacking the sensibility to appreciate their environment or care for it.

Yet Péron also interpreted these powerful blazes as hostile fires intended to ward them away:

> the fierce inhabitants of these regions seemed to want to push us away from their shores at this cost. They had retired to a high mountain, which itself appeared as an enormous pyramid of flame and smoke; from there they

99. 'bientôt il tira quelques coups de canon, dont le bruit retentit au fond de tous les coeurs': ibid., p. 95.

100. 'A ces rivages moins stériles, paroissoient affectées des tribus d'habitans plus nombreuses, si l'on en peut juger du moins par la multiplicité des feux allumés sur la côte, et par leur développement; on eût dit de quelques-uns d'autant de forêts embrâsées': ibid., p. 134.

101. 'De toutes parts s'élevoient des noirs tourbillons de fumée; de toutes parts les forêts étoient en feu: … Le spectacle étoit horrible: la flamme avoit détruit toute la végétation herbacée': ibid., p. 245.

102. 'De toutes parts s'élevoient d'immenses colonnes de flamme de de fumée; tout le revers des montagnes … étoit embrasé sue un espace de plusieurs lieues. Ainsi périssent ces forêts antiques et vénérables, que la faux du temps ne respecta durant plusieurs siècles, que pour les livrer plus intactes à l'instinct destructeur de leurs farouches habitans': ibid., p. 239.

103. 'Pour se chauffer, ou seulement peut-être par un effect de leur indifférence, ils allument dans les bois les incendies les plus désastreux': ibid., p. 364.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ehr/article/139/598-599/715/7726767 by guest on 04 October 2024

> made their clamours heard, and the meeting of the individuals appeared numerous there.[104]

Nonetheless, he set off in pursuit, 'accompanied by five well-armed men'. Péron also included an account from the diary of the botanist Jean-Baptiste Leschenault de la Tour:

> the captain saw thirty-six men walking along the shore, in parties of five or six, one in each group carrying a bundle of sagaies; and at the head of this little army was a man, a lighted firebrand in his hand, setting fire, here and there, to the bushes that covered the land.[105]

Leschenault's reference to the men's weapons, and his description of them as 'a little army' framed the captain's supposition that the fire-lighting must be an aggressive act aimed at them: 'This precaution seemed necessary to them to observe us from afar, or to remove the means for us to hide ourselves and to surprise them'.[106] Fires lit by Aboriginal peoples were, in French accounts, being employed to attack the land and the invaders. Fire had become, in their minds, a weapon against Europeans.[107]

In his response to these acts of fire violence, Péron parted ways with his European predecessors. He insisted at several points upon his restraint in not using firepower on Indigenous men whom he perceived to be attacking them. On one excursion ashore, when Hamelin, Leschenault and Nicolas-Martin Petit encountered local peoples, Péron reported that 'in vain did they brandish their sagaies and multiply their threatening gestures, not a single shot was fired against them'.[108] Elsewhere, he incorporated an account produced by the mineralogist Louis Depuch at what Baudin named Geographe Bay, describing an encounter with local men. Depuch felt that the men were encouraging them to leave by signalling how to retrace their steps:

> they even appeared to indicate the way by which we had entered, and that we supposed led also to the sea: however, pressed as we were by these savage men, there was not a moment to lose; we had either to fire or to continue our retreat: we preferred the latter, determined however to respond to the

104. 'les habitans farouches de ces régions paroissoient vouloir nous écarter à ce prix de leurs rivages. Ils s'étoient retirés sur une haute montagne, qui paroissoit elle-même comme une énorme pyramide de flamme et de fumée; de là ils faisoient entendre leurs clameurs, et la réunion des individus y paroissoit nombreuse': ibid., p. 245.

105. 'le capitaine vit trente-six hommes marchant le long du rivage par peletons de cinq ou six individus, dont un dans chaque groupe portoit un faisceau de sagaies; et à la tête de cette petite armée, un homme, un toson ardent à la main, mettoit, de distance en distance, le feu aux broussailles qui masquoient le terrain': ibid., pp. 238–9.

106. 'Cette précaution leur paroissoit-elle nécessaire pour nous observer de loin, ou pour nous ôter les moyens de nous cacher et de les surprendre': ibid., p. 239.

107. Ryan's claim that '[e]xplorers assume that Aboriginal grass fires are directed against them' (*Cartographic Eye*, p. 160) requires some nuancing, as this does not appear to be the case with earlier VOC and English explorers.

108. 'vainement ils brandissoient leurs sagaies, et multiplioient les gestes menaçans: pas un seul coup de fusil ne fut tiré contre eux': Péron, *Voyage de découvertes*, p. 238.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ehr/article/139/598-599/715/7726767 by guest on 04 October 2024

> first attempt by sagaie on us with a discharge of small shot, and to the second with a few bullets, leaving them, against the superiority of our arms, the advantage of striking the first blow.[109]

In this account, it was the French who controlled the tenor of the encounter, through which the moral superiority of their actions could be asserted. Indeed, the complex auditory power of European gunfire now became for some French explorers a tool with which to test Aboriginal senses and feelings. On Antoine Bruni d'Entrecasteaux's expedition of 1792 (searching for the earlier La Pérouse expedition, which had reached the continent in 1788), Alexandre d'Hesmivy d'Auribeau, captain of the *Espérance*, more than once attempted to gauge Aboriginal reactions to setting fire to gunpowder and firing shots, eliciting what he perceived as 'admiration' and 'astonishment' from people who 'were all extraordinarily frightened'.[110] European practices of fire could thus become an implement for the study of Indigenous peoples.

For French authors, fire communicated difference as a measure of civilisation. That Tasmanians were observed to be 'never without fire', even in summer, was interpreted as a result of local people's lack of industry to produce effective clothing.[111] Fire behaviours also appeared to reveal local gender relations. Women's work in cooking food supplies, as well as in catching the crayfish, abalone and shellfish that they prepared, struck the men aboard the earlier Bruni d'Entrecasteaux expedition as indicative of the idleness of Indigenous men.[112] Fire seemed also be used

109. 'Du geste, ils sembloient nous inviter à retourner sur nos pas; ils paroissoient même nous indiquer le passage par où nous étions entrés; et celui que nous supposions communiquer aussi à la mer. Cependant, pressés comme nous l'étions par ces hommes farouches, il n'y a avoit pas un instant à perdre; il falloit, ou faire feu, ou continuer notre retraite en bon ordre nous préférâmes ce dernier parti, bien décidés, toutefois, à répondre au premier coup de sagaie par une décharge à petit plomb, et au second, par quelques balles, leur laissant, contre la supériorité de nos armes, l'avantage de porter les premier coups': ibid., pp. 85–6.

110. Konishi, 'Discovering the Savage Senses', p. 119.

111. 'il faut que ces hommes ayent bien peu d'industrie pour ne pas chercher quelque chose propre à leur préserver du froid … ces peuples ne marchent jamais sans feu par tout': Jean Roux, lieutenant aboard *Le Mascarin*, 'Journal du voyage sur le vaisseau du Roy Le Mascarin', Mar. 1772, p. 13. There are four contemporary manuscript copies of this document, two in Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, Archives Nationales, one in Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France and one in Sydney, State Library of New South Wales. The account of the Australian component of the voyage is available online via the University of Tasmania Library Special and Rare Collections, at https://sparc.utas.edu.au/index.php/extracts-of-officers-logs-part-1 (accessed 14 Nov. 2023).

For more of Roux's account, in English translation, see E. Duyker, *The Discovery of Tasmania: Journal Extracts from the Expeditions of Abel Janszoon Tasman and Marc-Joseph Marion-Dufresne, 1642 and 1772* (Hobart, 1992); it is also discussed in Konishi, 'Discovering the Savage Senses', p. 115. For another intriguing exchange regarding fire between Dufresne's crew and local people on this expedition, in which the crew understood that they were being offered firesticks to set light to a fire that the Aboriginal people had made, which there is not space to analyse sufficiently here, see Julien Crozet, *Nouveau Voyage à la mer du sud, Commencé sous les ordres de M. Marion* (Paris, 1783), pp. 27–30; E. Duyker provides a brief analysis in *An Officer of the Blue: Marc-Joseph Marion Dufresne, South Sea Explorer, 1724–1772* (Carlton, VIC, 1994), p. 130.

112. S. Konishi, 'Idle Men: The Eighteenth-century Roots of the Indigenous Indolence Myth', in F. Peters-Little, A. Curthoys and J. Docker, eds, *Passionate Histories: Myth, Memory and Indigenous Australia* (Canberra, 2010), pp. 104–5, 107.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ehr/article/139/598-599/715/7726767 by guest on 04 October 2024

for local communication. This at least was the suggestion made by Péron in relation to his discovery of what he judged as a cleared grove. In this space, he described rushes deliberately planted in semi-circles and burned down to the ground, in the shape of characters he saw as 'a number of triangles, lozenges, and irregular polygons, some parallelograms but few regular squares and no circles'.[113] This led him to reflect upon the burned vegetation's similarities to Runic characters, Mexican hieroglyphics and the art of the San people, as well as other Indigenous rock art reported in the work of Arthur Philip. He regretted being unable 'to discover in the characters that I had before my eyes the feelings and the ideas of the coarse men of whom they were the work'.[114] Elsewhere, speculating upon burial practices, Péron wondered if fire might be the object of spiritual understanding, concluding that fire, 'without being worshipped as it was in former times, in these parts, appears to be regarded as something superior to other objects of nature'.[115]

The 'gifting' of European fire knowledge to local peoples was a practice both British and French contemporaries appeared to share. Alexandre-François de le Fresnaye Saint-Aignan on the *Recherche* showed Aboriginal people how a lens could ignite touchwood and, pleased with their astonished reaction, gave the lens to the man whom he judged 'most capable of using it for this purpose'.[116] Similarly, Arthur Phillip recorded his interaction with a local man who had approached the British campfire at Port Jackson, to observe British cooking practices. Phillip 'contrived to make him understand that large shells might conveniently be used' for boiling, by which means, he opined, the Aboriginal man might 'introduce the art of boiling among his countrymen'.[117] From the late eighteenth century, French and British interactions around fire with Indigenous people sought, in a way that previous groups had not, to transition local peoples to new technologies and to presumed civilisation.[118]

113. 'un grand nombre de triangle, de losanges et de polygones irréguliers, quelques parallélogrammes, mais peu de carrés réguliers et point de cercles': Péron, *Voyage de découvertes*, p. 75.

114. 'ne pouvoir découvrir dans les caractères que j'avois sous les yeux les sentiments et les idées des hommes grossiers dont ils étoient l'ouvrage': ibid., p. 77. Konishi has studied Péron's discussion in 'François Péron's Meditation on Death, Humanity and Savage Society', in Cook, Curthoys and Konishi, eds, *Representing Humanity*, pp. 109–21, and 'Early Encounters in Aboriginal Place: The Role of Emotions in French Readings of Indigenous Sites', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, ii (2015), pp. 12–23, in which (p. 15) she offers a Wardandi Noongar reading of what Péron described.

115. 'Sans être divinisé peut-être comme il le fut jadis, dans ces contrés, paroit être regardé comme quelque chose de supérieur aux autres objets de la nature': Péron, *Voyage de découvertes*, p. 271.

116. N.J.B. Plomley and J. Piard-Bernier, *The General: The Visits of the Expedition Led by Bruny d'Entrecasteaux to Tasmanian Waters in 1792 and 1793* (Launceston, TAS, 1993), p. 281, cited in Konishi, 'Discovering the Savage Senses', p. 128.

117. Arthur Phillip, *The Voyage of Governor Phillip to Botany Bay* (1789), ed. J.J. Auchmuty (Sydney, 1970), p. 49, cited in Konishi, 'Discovering the Savage Senses', p. 109.

118. Nicole Starbuck has suggested that 'The Aborigines' perceived state of being neither "savage" nor "civilized" was profoundly disappointing and confronting' for the French: 'Neither Civilized nor Savage', p. 133.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ehr/article/139/598-599/715/7726767 by guest on 04 October 2024

French accounts of fire practices reflect new eighteenth-century modes of investigation that were the impetus for their expeditions to the Australian continent. More than previous observers, they appeared to offer evidence of the deep cultural life of fire in Indigenous communities that they witnessed. Yet it would be misleading to suggest that the French generally perceived deep cultural meanings of fire for Indigenous people. Nicolas Baudin, the leader of the expedition in which Péron took part, speculated from his experiences, for example, that 'I think that the use of fire is quite unknown to them, not only because of their disdain for the tools which we wanted to give them but also because of their indifference and lack of attention on seeing us make use of it'.[119] Péron, as we have seen, thought otherwise: a good reminder that two people who travelled together could nonetheless draw very different conclusions from their experiences. Writing in the context of a colonising presence, Péron perceived Aboriginal peoples to use fire actively to remove Europeans from their midst. Moreover, his own rejection of firepower as a solution to threatening exchanges with Indigenous peoples may have been intended not only to suggest his own measure of civilisation but perhaps also an exercise of mercy over peoples whom he believed had already lost the right to control who entered their lands. In Péron's work, fire communicated the power of those who did not need to use it.

IV

This article has analysed almost two hundred years of European assessments and experiences of fire practices on the Australian continent, and the mindsets within which they were made. The texts considered here increase our sources of information about historic fire practices across varied different times and places. However, we must ensure that we interpret these records appropriately, carefully distinguishing between the different motivations of VOC, English and French navigators in the Australian continent—such as trade, immediate resources, ethnographic comparison and settlement. It is also important to register the different ecological environments (not only in terms of location but also season) in which their fire experiences and assessments were made.

European accounts of early modern fire practices on the Australian continent reveal at least as much about their authors as they do about Indigenous fire behaviours prior to British settlement. The interpretations encoded into such sources reveal distinctions between different European cohorts with particular contexts of engagement and complex entanglements with human and non-human entities on the continent. They thus understand the power of fire as knowledge and as violence (or the refusal of violence) in distinct ways. Yet they also shared some common assumptions. Interestingly, although they were

119. Degérando, *Observation of Savage Peoples*, tr. Moore, p. 35.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ehr/article/139/598-599/715/7726767 by guest on 04 October 2024

not always explicit, European accounts generally appeared to concur that fires on the Australian continent were not only a sign of human life but also the product of human endeavour, rather than being the result of naturally occurring events such as lightning strikes. Moreover, and importantly, there is evidence of the cumulative power of interpretations of fire and Aboriginal peoples circulating between and through such accounts. These European records have shared, for a long time, another form of power to control fire, as they wrote it into texts. As Marcia Langton once observed, most Australians 'do not know and relate to Aboriginal people. They relate to stories told by former colonists'.[120]

By listening to Indigenous knowledge-holders within specific cultures, languages and geographies, however, we can begin to see how much Europeans did not understand about the deep significance of fire to Aboriginal societies and of the specificities of its use to precise places and contexts.[121] Aboriginal knowledge-holders also emphasise how such practices continue and evolve beyond the chronology of these European accounts.[122] Aboriginal fire practices are now entrenched in the names of suburbs of Australia's settler cities. These place names reflect important aspects of Indigenous fire culture. On the unceded Whadjuk Noongar lands in Western Australia where this article has been written, the name Kalamunda, for example, as the Noongar linguistic scholar Len Collard writes, bears witness to the regenerative, cultural vibrancy of 'home fires where they all meet and gather at a place of trade and exchange, [and] where the old people introduce the young people to future husbands, wives and in-laws'.[123]

Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, Australia SUSAN BROOMHALL

120. M. Langton, '*Well, I Heard it on the Radio, and I Saw It on the Television*': *An Essay for the Australian Film Commission on the Politics and Aesthetics of Filmmaking by and about Aboriginal People and Things* (North Sydney, 1993), p. 33, cited in Dodson, 'Wentworth Lecture: The End in the Beginning', p. 4. See also M. Langton, *Burning Questions: Emerging Environmental Issues for Indigenous Peoples in Northern Australia* (Darwin, 1998).

121. One example of documenting engagement with such knowledges is C. Robinson, M. Barber, R. Hill, E. Gerrard and G. James, *Protocols for Indigenous Fire Management Partnerships* (Brisbane, 2016), available at https://www.aidr.org.au/media/4916/protocols_for-indigenous_fire_management_partn.pdf (accessed 31 Aug. 2020).

122. As Michael Dodson writes, 'the past cannot be dead, because it is built into the beings and bodies of the living. We do not need to re-find the past, because our subjectivities, our being in the world are inseparable from the past. Aboriginalities of today are regenerations and transformations of the spirit of the past, not literal duplications of the past; we re-create Aboriginality in the context of all our experiences, including our pre-colonial practices, our oppression and our political struggles': 'Wentworth Lecture: The End in the Beginning', p. 10.

123. L. Collard, 'Kalamunda', *Boodjar: Nyungar Placenames in the South-West of Western Australia* (University of Western Australia), available at www.boodjar.sis.uwa.edu.au/boodjar-placenames/Kalamunda (accessed 30 Aug. 2020), and see also audio recording of the Noongar elder Neville Collard telling the story of this area, available at the website of Perth NRM: https://www.perthnrm.com/blog/2018/06/25/noongar-stories-the-kalamunda-story/ (accessed 31 Aug. 2020).

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ehr/article/139/598-599/715/7726767 by guest on 04 October 2024