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THE OPPOSITE SIDE OF THE WORLD:
THOUGHTS ON GARETH MOORE'S MAP
(FROM *UNCERTAIN PILGRIMAGE*) (2006 – 2009)

GARETH MOORE
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If I were to dig hole in my backyard to the antipodal point of the earth, I'd arrive in the middle of the Indian Ocean at 49° 25' S and 59° 92' E. From here, the nearest landmass is the Crozet Archipelago, an uninhabited group of five small islands and a number of smaller islets, the largest of which, Île de la Possession (46° 25' S and 51° 40' E), is twenty kilometres at its broadest point. The Crozets lie approximately a quarter of the way toward Australia from Africa, over 2,000 kilometres south of Madagascar and 1,000 kilometres north of Antarctica. Geographically, they inhabit the "Roaring Forties," latitudes where the weather is severe and almost universally windy, cold, wet, and cloudy. It rains 300 days a year, with winds exceeding 100 kilometres per hour at least one day of every three. The only permanent human habitation on the Crozets is a French research station at Alfred-Faure (Port Alfred) on the east side of Île de la Possession. Within the station's chapel—Sainte-Marie du Vent—the Virgin Mary is manifested as wind.

The Crozets were discovered in 1772 by French explorer Marc-Joseph Marion du Fresne. Today, the only contact between these islands and the outside world is by a vessel bearing their discoverer's name, which visits several times a year. The *Marion Dufresne* is the world's largest and most sophisticated oceanographic research vessel. It brings supplies and rotates crews of scientists to the research station, which, because of the severity of the Île de la Possession's geography, is supplied by helicopter to the black volcanic sand beach at Baie Américaine (American Bay) and then from the beach by aerial cableway up a black basalt cliff to the station.

As they are at the end of the earth, the Crozets are home to a unique and diverse ecology dominated by penguins, sea elephants, and a growing population of giant albatrosses. The monumental nests of these remarkable birds are

scattered across the islands, mostly empty of their peripatetic denizens, who might spend as many as ten years at sea before returning to mate. Other native species have not fared as well. American Bay, for example, is named for the Nantucket sealers who began to frequent the islands in the late eighteenth century. They came in search of sealskins, which could sell in Guangzhou (Canton) for astronomical sums and subsequently spawned a competitive and often vicious trade. Skilled sealers could kill and skin as many as sixty seals an hour or one *every minute*. By 1835, the fur seal population was almost completely extinguished on the Crozets and the nearby Kerguelen Islands. Whaling ships followed the seal trade and small outposts on the islands were developed to over-winter ship crews. With them came a number of alien species that, over the years, wreaked havoc with the local fauna. Rats and mice arrived accidentally. Then cats were brought in to control them. Rabbits, goats, and pigs (the archipelago's Île aux Cochons is named after the latter) were introduced for food. After helping to damage the Crozet's fragile ecosystem, these species gradually died off themselves.

Shipwrecks were another source of dwellers on this isolated archipelago. They were so common that the British Royal Navy sent a ship to the islands every two to three years to search for survivors. In 1823, one such expedition picked up the crew of the British sealer *Princess of Wales*, which had been wrecked off the coast of Île de la Possession in 1821. Survival, according to sailor Charles Goodridge, was made possible by the sea elephant, which "Served us for meat, lodging, firing, shoe leather, and sewing thread. We washed in their blood and removed dirt and grease from our clothes. It was just like soap. Sea elephant blubber and a piece of rope yarn made a lamp. The teeth formed pipe bowls, with the leg of waterfowl as stems, and we dried the island grass and smoked it [...].

We cooked the heart and tongues. The brains were often ate raw, and they were as sweet as sugar.”¹

The crew of the French *Lascaux* was not so lucky. In 1887, it struck ground off the coast of Île Impénétrable, one of the archipelago’s smallest, most isolate, and impassable islands. Like Île de la Possession, sheer cliffs climb steeply up from the island’s encircling black sand beaches. On top of the cliffs, a wide, treeless, wind swept plateau provides scarce protection from the fury of the weather. It was with no small surprise, then, that after making it ashore, the *Lascaux*’s crew was welcomed by a small herd of goats grazing on the plateau’s grasses. The German Stoltenhoff brothers, who had taken up residence on the island in 1871, brought the goats ashore as a source of meat. The Stoltenhoff’s had hoped to make a fortune sealing. But as a result of the island’s severe hardships, the duo had to be rescued by HMS *Challenger* in 1873 when she called briefly during her circumnavigation of the globe while charting the ocean’s floor.

With the goats securing a small, consistent source of food, the crew of the *Lascaux* set about building a boat from salvaged pieces of wood scrounged from the island’s beaches or abandoned by the Stoltenhoff’s. Due to the scarcity and poverty of materials, it took the crew almost two years to craft a seaworthy vessel, the progress of which was often halted, sometimes for material patiently sourced from flotsam washed up on shore. Tragically, on the eve before a group of seven of the *Lascaux*’s sailors were at last scheduled to set sail, an epic storm hit the island. In a few short hours their makeshift boat was completely destroyed. Disconsolate, the intrepid sailors found a giant petrel, which they used as a messenger pigeon by tying a note to its leg. The note was retrieved seven months later and 5,000 miles away in Fremantle, Western Australia. But by the time a ship arrived to rescue them, the crew was lost without a trace.

Over the next one hundred years, Île Impénétrable was visited infrequently. In 1922, Ernest Shackleton’s *Quest* landed briefly, during which the ship’s botanist, Lyman Williams, discovered the thin billed or “Williams” bunting. In 1938, a Norwegian scientific expedition spent time cataloguing collections of plants, birds, and rocks. After World War II, a plan to develop Île Impénétrable as a farm was abandoned (luckily for the island’s unique ecology, which might have been irreparably damaged). During the 1950s, Jacques Guilbaut, a missionary based at Sainte-Marie du Vent, stopped on Île Impénétrable, where he discovered the flightless rail or *Indiana Guilbauti*, which is the smallest flightless bird in the world. In 1962, a Royal Society expedition landed scientists, but they were unable to penetrate the interior of the island so mapping had to be done from ship. Attempts to navigate the island also failed due to cloud cover. To this day, there are few accurate maps of the island.

Unexpectedly (particularly for a hypothetical journey that began in a West Coast Canadian backyard), the most thorough scientific exploration of Île Impénétrable came in 1982, when a party of schoolboys and their teachers from Vancouver’s St. George’s School landed on the island. They remained there for four months. Travelling to the South Seas aboard the *Marion Dufresne*, members of this unusual expedition spent time making detailed maps, studying the flora and fauna, and mapping the geology of the island. They carried out a ringing program on the island’s birds and contributed more to current knowledge of Île Impénétrable than any previous expedition. High on the island’s previously uncharted plateau, the schoolboys also discovered a curious wooden relic comprised of a stake driven into the ground on top of which a small, rotting wooden board had been crudely fixed with a (now rusted) nail. On top of the board, as if set on a plate, sat a medallion of St. Jude, the patron of desperate cases

and lost causes. While it's uncertain whether this odd cairn—clearly not a grave—was erected by the crew of the *Lascaux* or some other, long lost sailor, the schoolboys, in respect of what they perceived as an offering, took the medallion as a gift. In exchange, they left a medallion of their own (a dragon, for St. George). Perhaps future pilgrims to this desolate and inhospitable spot will take it upon themselves to continue this tradition.

NOTES

1. Charles Goodridge quoted in Alan Gurney, *Below the Convergence: Voyages Toward Antarctica, 1699–1839* (New York, W. W. Norton and Company, 1997), 148–149.