

Ridley, Glynis. *The Discovery of Jeanne Baret: A Story of Science, the High Seas, and the First Woman to Circumnavigate the Globe*. First paperback edition. New York: Broadway Paperbacks, 2010. ISBN 978-0-307-46353-1.

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Until the publication of this book, Jeanne Baret, the first woman to sail around the globe, was little known outside academic circles, and then primarily through two famous eighteenth-century texts in which she is briefly mentioned. First, in his published account of the first French trip around the world, the explorer Louis-Antoine de Bougainville related that when the ship's botanical assistant "Jean Baret" went ashore in Tahiti in May 1768, "he" was immediately perceived by the Tahitians to be a woman and threatened with rape, requiring delivery from French soldiers. Second, the same anecdote recurs in Denis Diderot's philosophical dialogue, the *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*, serving in part to corroborate the instinctual character of the Tahitians.

The Discovery of Jeanne Baret has at the same time brought Baret to the attention of a broad public and offered an alternative interpretation of major facets of her life, including the notorious "discovery" of her sex in Tahiti. Consistent with its subtitle, the book is less a focused biography – for Baret remains substantially enigmatic through to the end – than a sketch of a biography filled with contextualizing material taken from cultural and scientific history.

Baret was born in 1740 into a family of peasants. How she became the housekeeper, lover, and botanical assistant of the gentleman physician and botanist Philibert de Commerson is unclear. Breaking with the usual assumption that Baret was merely a winsome local who was seduced and then educated by Commerson, Ridley speculates that Baret was educated in her own way before meeting Commerson, namely as an "herb woman," a woman trained in the art of recognizing and gathering medically useful plants; as a consequence, she became Commerson's teacher as well as his pupil. The main evidence here, besides Commerson's expressed preference for intelligent women and Baret's later competence as his botanical assistant, is a manuscript found among Commerson's early papers which would seem to be a book of medicinal secrets confided to him by someone else.

In any event, Baret and Commerson became lovers as well as collaborators. After giving birth to a child (presumably Commerson's) and giving it up, Baret embarked as Commerson's botanical assistant, disguised as a man, on a governmentally

sponsored trip around the world being led by Bougainville. Doubts about her sex apparently surfaced early on and led to threats and humiliations; Baret's claim that she was a eunuch did little to ease the tensions.

According to Ridley, when the couple was finally able to leave their ship for the first time on the eastern coast of South America, it was Baret, not Commerson, who discovered the now well-known plant bougainvillea (strategically named after their commander), since Commerson was suffering from severe ulcers on his leg at the time. Throughout the trip, Baret was unquestionably an assiduous assistant, carrying Commerson's mass of equipment and performing the most arduous physical tasks in his stead or along with him.

Turning to the Tahitian episode of the trip, Ridley rejects Bougainville's anecdote as well as a chorus of acceptance among later scholars. First, a different story is suggested by the words and behavior of the Tahitian Aotourou, one in which the Tahitians recognized Baret as a transvestite but made no attempt to rape her; indeed, Aotourou, one of the initial welcomers in his relation, became friends with Baret. Second and more generally, eyewitnesses other than Bougainville fail to corroborate his anecdote. Third and lastly, Ridley tries to show what Bougainville stood to gain by inventing the tale. In her analysis, the admiral had been aware of Baret's sex since their arrival in Rio de Janeiro; he had nonetheless decided to play along with the fiction that she was eunuch to avoid responsibility for violating the ordinance against women on royal ships and because he pitied Baret and knew that she was Commerson's best available assistant. According to Ridley, Bougainville's anecdote about Baret's near-rape by Tahitians was inserted into his journal at a later date, at least partly to cover up a more uncomfortable event: the gang-rape of Baret by Bougainville's own crew on the island of New Ireland several weeks later. In support of Ridley's hypothesis, it is worth stressing that three of the four major accounts of the trip – all, in fact, but Bougainville's – allude to Baret's suffering some form of sexual assault on New Ireland at the hands of the crew, though none provides clear details.

Soon afterward, Baret realized she was pregnant, perhaps because of the assault on New Ireland. Apparently realizing that the charade was no longer tenable, Bougainville decided to leave Baret on the French island of Mauritius, where Commerson too preferred to stay, sensing that he had failed in his mission of providing France with useful botanical information, and hoping that the rich local flora would allow him to redeem himself. After Commerson's death in 1773, Baret managed to find work as a barmaid before marrying a French soldier and returning to France, thereby completing her circumnavigation.

Overall, in Ridley's portrait, Baret comes across as fascinating though mysterious and even as something of a heroine: In particular, she travels around the world in part because of her own curiosity, she is brave enough to defy her eighteenth-century destiny as a female peasant, and she is regularly determined to make the best of

difficult situations. By contrast, Commerson emerges as charming but selfish, while Bougainville is compassionate but stealthy and calculating.

The Discovery of Jeanne Baret is written with a lively, engaging style, at an intellectual level suitable for a wide range of readers. Comparisons with the present along with imaginative reconstructions of aspects of daily existence effectively bring the eighteenth century to life. Another entertaining pedagogical device much in evidence in the book is the contextualizing digression. On the one hand, *The Discovery of Jeanne Baret* is luxuriantly digressive, with asides on such topics as the problem of longitude, early modern drugs for inducing abortion, the political importance of the beverage *maté* in the South America, and the origin of the nursery rhyme "Peter Piper." On the other hand, Ridley is adept at making transitions and enriching the text with an enticing but not overwhelming amount of cultural and scientific background, so that digressions do not seem conspicuously digressive.

Ridley's fact-checking appears reasonably careful, though inaccurate statements occasionally appear. For example, it was Jean Le Rond D'Alembert, not Diderot (162), who wrote the controversial article "Genève" for the *Encyclopédie*, and it was Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon, not Bernard de Jussieu (29), who headed the Parisian Jardin du Roi, a fact that Ridley recognizes the second time around (46). Because of the breadth of the book, which takes over huge swaths of recent scholarship on the eighteenth century, the history of science, and other domains, specialists of all stripes will undoubtedly find similar corrections to bring up, but these points will probably be overshadowed by readers' perceptions of the plausibility of Ridley's depiction of Baret. To Ridley's credit, the lack of traditional footnotes or endnotes notwithstanding, she generally indicates on what bases she is making her inferences, so that readers can choose to accept or reject them; a narrative section entitled "Notes and References" at the end of the book is also useful in this regard. Indeed, one of the major attractions of *The Discovery of Jeanne Baret*, along with the biography of Baret, the imaginative renderings of eighteenth-century life, and the intriguing historical asides, is the implicit narrative of an academic detective at grips with her material, combing through archives, analyzing texts in detail, and bringing to bear the insights of recent historiography; rarely has scholarly endeavor been so vividly rendered.