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Kenneth Morgan

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A Historical Myth? Matthew Flinders and the Quest for a Strait

KENNETH MORGAN

This article takes issue with a recent argument, made by the late Rupert Gerritsen, that Matthew Flinders deliberately concocted a myth about a north–south strait dividing Australia in order to gain the attention and patronage of Sir Joseph Banks to support the first circumnavigation of Terra Australis in HMS Investigator in 1801–3. This article argues that Flinders did not create a myth but based his arguments on contemporary views that such a dividing strait might exist, backed up with cartographic evidence. Flinders’ achievements in connection with the circumnavigation reflected the analytical mind that led him to search for a strait.

On 6 September 1800, the young naval lieutenant Matthew Flinders wrote the most important letter of his career when he contacted Sir Joseph Banks, the President of the Royal Society, the most prestigious scientific body in Britain, about the possibility of a large-scale expedition to survey Australia’s coastline. Flinders was well aware that the shape and size of Australia were unknown to geographers and navigators, and that many parts of the continent were yet to be mapped accurately.¹ Flinders’ letter was prompted by the interest in such an expedition shown by Banks and the naval officer Philip Gidley King, soon to become governor of New South Wales, in 1798/9. Both Banks and King had already endorsed Flinders’ credentials as a suitable leader for the voyage.² Flinders knew by January 1800 that the British government envisaged sending out such an expedition, and that he might be made its commander.³

In September 1800 Flinders had just returned to England after five years at Port Jackson, then a small, isolated British outpost in the southern hemisphere. For much of his time in New South Wales, Flinders had been involved in coastal exploration. Together with his friend George Bass in the sloop *Norfolk*,

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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¹ Flinders to Banks, 6 September 1800, in *Matthew Flinders: Personal Letters from an Extraordinary Life*, ed. Paul Brunton (Sydney: Hordern House in association with the State Library of New South Wales, 2002), 50–2.

² Banks to John King, 15 May 1798, in *The Indian and Pacific Correspondence of Sir Joseph Banks, 1768–1820*, ed. Neil Chambers, 8 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2008–14), vol. IV, 158, 502; and Philip Gidley King to Banks, 20 March 1799, *ibid.*, vol. V, 60.

³ National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, Flinders to Pulteney Malcolm, 17 January 1800, Flinders Papers, FLI/8a.

he had discovered Bass Strait and had circumnavigated Van Diemen's Land, proving for the first time that it was an island. These were the most important geographical discoveries about Australia since James Cook had examined the east coast in 1770.⁴ Governor John Hunter of New South Wales sent back Flinders' chart of Bass Strait to the Admiralty. It was received on 16 February 1800 and published by the London private cartographer Aaron Arrowsmith on 16 June 1800, before Flinders returned to England.⁵

Banks had sailed in Cook's *Endeavour* and had an abiding interest in botany and in possibilities for more extensive British settlement in New South Wales. He promoted serious attempts to extend geographical and scientific knowledge, and facilitated various voyages of exploration. Banks maintained an extensive correspondence with an eclectic transnational network of people concerning botanical specimens and scientific ideas, and he was frequently asked to provide support in advance for voyages of exploration before more formal applications were made.⁶ At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Banks was virtually the 'managing director' of all British proposals concerning Australia.⁷ He had met Flinders, albeit briefly, and knew of Flinders' work at Port Jackson before receiving the letter of 6 September 1800.⁸ While Banks was contemplating Flinders' request, he was aware of the preparation of a rival voyage of exploration in Australian waters by French vessels under the command of Nicolas Baudin.⁹ Flinders' letter to Banks came at an opportune time, for Banks became anxious that the French voyage, which he supported, would make new gains in natural history before a British expedition could do so.¹⁰

Flinders' letter to Banks suggested ways in which a voyage of discovery to Australia could be arranged, based on his own experience in sailing in Australian waters. Flinders proposed that the voyage should be a circumnavigation of Australia, an extensive, ambitious undertaking that had never yet been attempted.¹¹ At the time, New Holland was the name given to Australia west of 135° longitude, having been applied in 1644 by Abel Tasman in recognition of Dutch exploration of Terra Australis. Australian territory east of 135° longitude was known as New

⁴ Ernest Scott, *The Life of Matthew Flinders* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1914), 102.

⁵ Brunton, ed., *Matthew Flinders*, 50.

⁶ Among many discussions of Banks' contribution to British settlement in New South Wales are: John Gascoigne, *Science in the Service of Empire: Joseph Banks, the British State and the Uses of Science in the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and Glyndwr Williams, 'The Centre of All We Discoverers': Sir Joseph Banks, Exploration and Empire', in *Sir Joseph Banks: A Global Perspective*, eds R. E. R. Banks, B. Elliott, J. G. Hawkes, D. King-Hele and G. L. Lucas (London: Kew Publishing, 1994), 177–91.

⁷ Charles H. Bertie, 'Matthew Flinders, Australia's Navigator', *Journal and Proceedings of the Australian Historical Society* 3, part VII (1915–17): 303.

⁸ See Flinders to Banks, 21 October 1793, and Banks to John King, 15 May 1798, in Chambers, ed., *The Indian and Pacific Correspondence*, Vol. IV, 158, 502.

⁹ Nicole Starbuck, 'Sir Joseph Banks and the Baudin Expedition: Exploring the Politics of the Republic of Letters', *French History and Civilisation: Papers from the George Rudé Seminar* 3 (2009): 56–68.

¹⁰ H. B. Carter, *Sir Joseph Banks* (London: British Museum, Natural History, 1988), 366.

¹¹ T. M. Perry, 'Matthew Flinders – The Man', in *Matthew Flinders – The Ifs of History*, ed. R. W. Russell (Adelaide: University Relations Unit, Flinders University, 1979), 53–7.

South Wales, following Cook's claiming of that territory for Britain in 1770 and the British settlement of a penal colony there in 1788.¹² No one knew before 1800 whether New Holland and New South Wales formed one landmass or comprised two separate landmasses.

Flinders' letter of 6 September 1800 referred to his circumnavigation of Van Diemen's Land and his coastal surveys of New South Wales, and then emphasised the importance of a further, more ambitious voyage to promote British imperial interests and to extend knowledge of Australian geography and natural history. Flinders referred to a conjecture that an extensive strait divided Australia via the Gulf of Carpentaria.¹³ This reference, and the letter in general, whetted Banks' interest. Banks welcomed the communication from Flinders. At the beginning of 1800, he had liaised with Philip Gidley King about sending out the *Lady Nelson*, under the command of James Grant, from England to Port Jackson. Grant was instructed to hand over the ship to Flinders on arrival. Banks wrote the instructions for the *Lady Nelson's* voyage that outlined a mission to examine and chart Australia's coastline and to probe for any waterway that might divide the mainland or allow access to the interior.¹⁴ Within a couple of months of receiving Flinders' letter of 6 September 1800, Banks was the leading promoter of a new, more ambitious expedition to circumnavigate Australia with Flinders as commander. This was the voyage of the *Investigator*, undertaken between 1801 and 1803.¹⁵

Flinders' letter to Banks has recently attracted a critique. The late Rupert Gerritsen argued that Flinders deliberately concocted the notion of a mythical strait through Australia in order to attract Banks' attention and interest. Gerritsen was an independent scholar with a strong interest in the exploration and cartography of Australia. In an essay entitled 'Getting the Strait Facts Straight', he noted that Flinders was the first person to refer in writing to such a strait, and that he influenced the Admiralty and their advisers, including Banks, to pursue the possibility of a strait dividing Australia into two separate landmasses even though contemporary maps showed Australia's coastline very much as we recognise it today, with no gaps in the Gulf of Carpentaria indicating the presence of such a strait.¹⁶ Gerritsen supported his arguments with citations to other people influenced by Flinders' idea of a strait and with reference to maps from the National Library of Australia's collection to prove his cartographic point about a continuous coastline for Australia. He contended that various historians have accepted Flinders' comments about the search for such a strait from one book to another without questioning whether the remarks were based on definite

¹² The boundary between New Holland and New South Wales is explained in Mitchell Library, Sydney (hereafter ML), Sir Joseph Banks, 'Draft of Propos'd Introduction to Capt'n Flinders Voyages', November 1811, Papers of Sir Joseph Banks, Series 70.16.

¹³ Flinders to Banks, 6 September 1800, in Brunton, ed., *Matthew Flinders*, 51.

¹⁴ Kenneth Morgan, *Matthew Flinders, Maritime Explorer of Australia* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 45.

¹⁵ The voyage is described in detail in K. A. Austin, *The Voyage of the Investigator 1801–1803* (Adelaide: Rigby Limited, 1964).

¹⁶ Rupert Gerritsen, 'Getting the Strait Facts Straight', *The Globe* 72 (2013): 11–21.

information available at the time. Gerritsen concluded there is not enough evidence to demonstrate that the notion of a strait dividing Australia gained popular currency in Britain and New South Wales circa 1800. He claimed that Flinders perpetuated a myth in order to satisfy his own career ambitions.¹⁷ Gerritsen's paper was considered sufficiently original in its ideas to be awarded the Dorothy Prescott Prize of the Australian and New Zealand Map Society in 2012.

This article challenges this interpretation of Flinders' quest for a north–south strait by investigating these claims. It argues that Gerritsen was correct in identifying Flinders as instigating such a notion but that a number of other people of importance also believed in the same idea. Therefore, the carrot dangled to Banks in Flinders' letter of 6 September 1800 was not mainly a case of a sole person cannily advancing the notion of a north–south strait for his own career advantage, even though there is no question that Flinders had ambitions for naval advancement through his maritime explorations.¹⁸ These considerations lead into another argument of this article, which is to demonstrate that Gerritsen was incorrect in suggesting that Flinders' quest for a strait contradicted contemporary cartographic evidence. I argue that Flinders' pursuit of a strait was supported by cartography; that other influential people with whom he was in contact also thought it worthwhile to search for a dividing strait; and that it is too narrow a view of Flinders' motives to single out one issue as the key to persuading Banks to instigate the *Investigator* expedition. My article finally suggests that the reasons for a detailed maritime exploration of Australia's shores were much wider than the search for a strait, or an interpretation of cartographic evidence. It is important to establish these points because the *Investigator* expedition was a major landmark in Australian maritime exploration.

I

The first reference in writing to the possibility of a north–south strait dividing Australia was made by Flinders, as Gerritsen suggested. Towards the end of his 'Narrative of the expedition of the Colonial Sloop *Norfolk*', Flinders reported the discovery of Bass Strait on the voyage in 1798/9 and its advantages for navigators. He then added that, within a few years, it might be feasible to confirm 'the verification, or futility of the conjecture, that a still larger than Bass's Strait dismembers New Holland'.¹⁹ Flinders submitted his 'Narrative' to Governor

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ On this theme see David Mackay, 'In the Shadow of Cook: The Ambition of Matthew Flinders', in *European Voyaging towards Australia*, eds John Hardy and Alan Frost (Canberra: Highland Press, 1990), 99–111.

¹⁹ Entry for 9 January 1799 in 'Matthew Flinders's "Narrative of the expedition of the Colonial Sloop *Norfolk*"', in *Van Diemen's Land Revealed: Flinders and Bass and Their Circumnavigation of the Island in the Colonial Sloop Norfolk 1798–1799*, ed. Dan Sprod (Hobart: Blubber Head Press, 2009), 63. This quotation comes from a rewritten and expanded version of the journal that Flinders made some time after the end of the voyage on 13 January 1799; the original manuscript version of the journal has not survived. A letter from Flinders to George Bass, who also sailed on the voyage,

Hunter who had a keen interest in the exploration of New South Wales. Hunter was a skilled hydrographic surveyor who had charted Port Jackson, Broken Bay and Botany Bay in 1788 and 1789. Hunter was keen to expand knowledge of the environs of Sydney in order to promote British interests in New South Wales for the future.²⁰

A few months after Flinders and Bass had circumnavigated Van Diemen's Land, Hunter wrote a letter to Banks with his own further explanation of the possibility that Australia might be divided by a major strait. This letter is not mentioned by Gerritsen, yet it is important because it offers a more extensive explanation than Flinders provided in his short remark. Hunter wrote:

Not yet having discovered any very extensive River in this Country, it may not be improbable, it may hereafter be found to be divided from that part which retains the name of New Holland by some Narrow Sea, which may yet be Navigable. The Gulph of Carpentaria which is certainly not known nor how far it may extend southward may in some degree Warrant such a conjecture – it is to be hoped that Government will hereafter send fit Vessels & proper Persons for such an examination.²¹

Hunter knew, as did Flinders, that no navigator had explored the Gulf of Carpentaria in the century-and-a-half since Tasman's second voyage reached Terra Australis in 1644. This was partly because the Dutch concluded, after Tasman, that they would not discover useful territories in Australia, but also because no other European maritime explorers ventured near the gulf for such a long period of time.²²

Hunter wanted to follow up his supposition quickly. At the time of writing the letter, in June 1799, he was fitting out a sloop to send Flinders northwards to investigate Hervey's Bay, off the coast of modern Queensland, 'which I have conceived from the largeness of the opening may shew us a large & extensive sea within, or perhaps a Navigable river which may lead us some distance into the interior of the Country'.²³ Flinders duly made this voyage, again in the *Norfolk*, and reported his findings: to his own disappointment he did not come across any river of importance or find an inland sea.²⁴ After the voyage in the *Norfolk* was concluded, Hunter wrote again to Banks to praise Flinders' work as a

indicates that the manuscript was compiled before 15 February 1800. See *ibid.*, 23. Bass also kept a journal on the voyage but made no similar comment: see 'George Bass: Journal ... from notes made on board the Colonial Sloop *Norfolk* in 1798 and 1799', *ibid.*, 71–106.

²⁰ T. M. Perry, 'Charts and Views', in *The Art of the First Fleet and Other Early Australian Drawings*, eds Bernard Smith and Alwyne Wheeler (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 72.

²¹ Hunter to Banks, 1 June 1799, in Chambers, ed., *The Indian and Pacific Correspondence*, Vol. V, 85–8.

²² Günter Schilder, 'New Cartographical Contributions to the Coastal Exploration of Australia in the Course of the Seventeenth Century', *Imago Mundi* 26 (1972): 43.

²³ Hunter to Banks, 1 June 1799, in Chambers, ed., *The Indian and Pacific Correspondence*, Vol. V, 85–8.

²⁴ Matthew Flinders, *A Voyage to Terra Australis; Undertaken for the Purpose of Completing the Discovery of that Vast Country, and Prosecuted in the Years 1801, 1802, and 1803, in His Majesty's Ship the Investigator, and Subsequently in the Armed Vessel Porpoise and Cumberland Schooner with an Account of the Shipwreck of the Porpoise, Arrival of the Cumberland at Mauritius, and Imprisonment of the Commander during Six Years and a Half in that Island*, 2 vols (London: G. and W. Nicol, 1814), vol. I, ccii.

maritime surveyor and to hope that the British government could continue the examination of coastal Australia in a suitable vessel.²⁵

As Gerritsen pointed out, Philip Gidley King, who succeeded Hunter as governor of New South Wales, also referred to the possibility of a strait dividing Australia in two. On 28 September 1800, King explained in a letter to Banks that he had sent the *Lady Nelson* under Grant on a coastal voyage of exploration in New South Wales, 'to solve the doubt whether the mountains are separated from the other parts of New Holland by a sea or strait running from the Gulf of Carpentaria into the Southern ocean, which is a favourite idea in this country'.²⁶ This comment was made at a time when exploration of the interior of New South Wales had not penetrated far inland and the Blue Mountains had not yet been crossed.²⁷ King wrote another letter on 31 December 1800 to the Secretary of the Admiralty in London in which he remarked that it was 'the popular idea in this Colony that there is a communication between the South Part of New Holland and its Northern Extremity, terminating by the Gulph of Carpentaria which if so Insulates New South Wales'.²⁸

Gerritsen omitted further evidence that King was strongly convinced that a search should be made for a north–south strait. King was concerned to determine the extent of the western boundary of New South Wales for strategic purposes: he wanted to secure the colony against possible incursions by the French.²⁹ He therefore persisted in the quest for a dividing strait through Australia. In March 1801, King sent Grant on a second voyage in the *Lady Nelson*, accompanied by the surveyor ensign Francis Barrallier. King wrote to Banks to explain that the voyage was necessary before a conclusive chart could be made.³⁰ After Grant and Barrallier had charted the southern coast of what was then New South Wales, King stated that 'the conjecture of N. S. Wales being insulated from New Holland still remains undecided'. However, Grant's finding that there was no opening between Wilsons Promontory, the southeastern end of New South Wales, and Western Port, on the coast of modern Victoria, 'does away with the supposed opening between these points, which was presumed might be the southern entrance of such a separation, as it lies nearly in the meridian of the Gulf of Carpentaria'.³¹

²⁵ Hunter to Banks, 20 February 1800, in Chambers, ed., *The Indian and Pacific Correspondence*, Vol. V, 159.

²⁶ King to Banks, 28 September 1800, *ibid.*, vol. V, 202–5.

²⁷ T. M. Perry, *Australia's First Frontier: The Spread of Settlement in New South Wales, 1788–1829* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1963).

²⁸ King to Evan Nepean, 31 December 1800, in *Historical Records of Australia*, ed. Frederick Watson, series I, II (Sydney: Library Committee of the Commonwealth Parliament, 1914), 700.

²⁹ Russel Ward, *Finding Australia: The History of Australia to 1821* (Melbourne: Heinemann Educational Australia, 1987), 268–71, 274.

³⁰ King to Banks, 10 March 1801, in *Historical Records of New South Wales*, ed. F. M. Bladen, 7 vols (Sydney: Government Printer, 1892–1901), vol. IV, 311.

³¹ Philip Gidley King, 'State of His Majesty's Settlements in New South Wales', 31 December 1801, *ibid.*, vol. IV, 670.

The scientific personnel who travelled with Flinders in the *Investigator* made no comments in their letters or diaries about the possible existence of a dividing strait, but the ship's company did discuss this possibility. During the expedition, Flinders recorded in his journal, when the expedition reached the south Australian coast, that the ship's company's conjectures about 'large rivers, deep inlets, inland seas, and passages to the Gulph of Carpentaria' were 'the phrases most current in our conversations'.³² Robert Brown, the botanist who sailed on the *Investigator* expedition, implicitly accepted the possibility of a strait in a comment made many years after the voyage had ended and Flinders had died. Brown stated that Flinders' devotion to geographical research in Australia was to undertake 'a complete survey of the coasts of New Holland, a country at that time so imperfectly known that it was still uncertain whether it form'd one great land or consisted of two or more islands'.³³

Flinders, Hunter and King had indicated that there might be a dividing strait that split New Holland and New South Wales into two separate landmasses. Brown had implicitly accepted the same theory. A similar idea, as Gerritsen noted, informed the surveying of the major French scientific expedition under Baudin that explored Australia's coastline at exactly the same time as the *Investigator's* voyage. François Péron, a scientific officer who sailed on the Baudin expedition, explained that:

one of the objects more particularly recommended in our instructions, was, to penetrate to the back of the Isles of St Pierre and St François and to reconnoitre very particularly that part of the continent that was concealed behind this archipelago.³⁴ On this point was supposed to be a strait, which intersecting New Holland into two large islands, would open into the end of the Gulf of Carpentaria. On this point also, the best informed naturalists, not supposing it at all probable that so large a continent should be entirely without any rivers, have placed the mouth of such as they thought must be somewhere in New Holland; and this hypothesis is authorised, we must allow, by the immense gulf [i.e. Spencer Gulf] which is situated on the south west coast of this vast continent. Unfortunately this ingenious supposition has not been supported by experience.³⁵

The Baudin expedition's production of the first reasonably accurate chart of the Victorian coast from Port Phillip westwards proved there was no entrance on that coast to such a dividing strait.³⁶

³² Entry for 21 February 1802 in *Australia Circumnavigated: The Voyage of Matthew Flinders in HMS Investigator, 1801–1803*, ed. Kenneth Morgan, Hakluyt Society's Publications, 3rd series, nos. 28–9, 2 vols (London: Ashgate, 2015), vol. I, 314.

³³ British Library, London (hereafter BL), Add MS 32,441, Robert Brown, 'Statement of the Services of Captain Matthew Flinders R.N.', 12 March 1847, ff. 430–1.

³⁴ The islands of St Peter and St Francis, near the head of the Great Australian Bight, marked the limit of seventeenth-century voyaging by Dutch navigators along the south Australian coast.

³⁵ François Péron, *A Voyage of Discovery to the Southern Hemisphere, Performed by Order of the Emperor Napoleon during the years 1801, 1802, 1803 and 1804*, 2 vols (Melbourne: Marsh Walsh, 1975), vol. I, 254.

³⁶ Trevor Lipscombe, 'Two Continents or One? The Baudin Expedition's Unacknowledged Achievements on the Coast of Victoria', *Victorian Historical Journal* 78, no. 1 (2007): 38.

Gerritsen rightly pointed out that the contemporary comments he cited cannot be taken as evidence about the popularity of the idea circulating about the existence of a north–south strait. Nor, to my knowledge, is there historical evidence that could determine whether the notion was popular or not. Gerritsen used this line of argument, along with drawing attention to Flinders being ultimately responsible for circulating this ‘myth’, for his own purposes, to charge Flinders with misrepresentation in his letter to Banks to promote a substantial voyage of discovery to Australia.³⁷ However, omitting the letter from Hunter to Banks and two statements by King on this subject is significant in this regard. If one discounts the idea that the popularity of a strait dividing Australia cannot be proven or discounted, one can still make the point that Flinders and the two governors of New South Wales at the time – the chief naval and political officers in the colony – were persuaded that the idea was worth pursuing through more extensive maritime exploration of Australia’s shores than had yet occurred; that Robert Brown and members of Flinders’ ship’s company were similarly persuaded; and that the French voyage of exploration under Baudin also aimed to confirm or disprove the supposition of the existence of a strait.

II

Gerritsen’s article further argued that contemporary maps of Australia showed a continuous coastline around the continent. His charge is that Flinders deliberately tried to dangle a carrot to Banks’ curiosity by ignoring this basic geographical fact. However, matters are not so simple as this. The Gulf of Carpentaria was the area of Australia where Flinders thought it likely that a dividing strait would be found.³⁸ Flinders believed the seventeenth-century Dutch charting of the Gulf was open to question. This is mentioned several times in the introduction to *A Voyage to Terra Australis*, the magnum opus that Flinders published in 1814 to describe and contextualise his circumnavigation of Australia. In his synthesis of knowledge about Australia’s geography before his circumnavigation, Flinders noted that ‘the real form of this gulph [of Carpentaria] remained in great doubt with geographers’. The east side of the Gulf had been explored by the Dutch to the latitude of 17° south, but ‘of the rest of the Gulph, no one could say, with any confidence, upon what authority its form had been given in the charts’.³⁹ This no doubt referred to the fact that the logbook and other records from Tasman’s second Australian voyage had disappeared (and have never been located to this day).⁴⁰ In another remark, Flinders suggested that ‘the apparent

³⁷ Gerritsen, ‘Getting the Strait Facts Straight’: 11.

³⁸ For a map showing the possible location of the strait, see Robert Tiley, *Australian Navigators: Picking up Shells and Catching Butterflies in an Age of Revolution* (Sydney: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 137.

³⁹ Flinders, *A Voyage to Terra Australis*, vol. I, xlvi–xlvii.

⁴⁰ Geoffrey C. Ingleton, *Matthew Flinders: Navigator and Chartmaker* (Guildford: Genesis Publications in association with Hedley Australia, 1986), 207.

want of rivers has induced some persons to think, that Terra Australis might be composed of two or more islands, as had been formerly suspected by the Dutch, and by Dampier'.⁴¹

Gerritsen challenged the veracity of these comments, arguing that Flinders was casting doubt on Dutch charting of the Gulf of Carpentaria where no doubt was needed. The evidence to support this sceptical view of Flinders' remarks lay, as Gerritsen viewed it, quite clearly in available cartographic evidence. Gerritsen searched the National Library of Australia's holdings of maps of Australia published between 1798 and 1802, and identified eight examples that show the Gulf coast as continuous.⁴² His article reproduced copies of these maps, and they do indeed show a continuous coastline for the Gulf of Carpentaria. We do not know for certain that Flinders knew of these maps, but it is very likely, given his thorough preparation for all his voyages. Eight maps is only the tip of the iceberg of the maps of Australia available in the public domain in the 1790s, though many other contemporary maps would confirm Gerritsen's point.⁴³ But this is not really the correct methodological procedure to follow on this matter. A more pertinent line of investigation is to explain which maps Flinders took with him in the *Investigator*, and why their depiction of the Gulf of Carpentaria differed from the maps in the eight examples cited by Gerritsen.

A succinct summation of contemporary knowledge of Australian geography and the accuracy or otherwise of the Dutch charting of the Gulf of Carpentaria is relevant here. Europeans lacked confirmation that Australia was a continent at the beginning of the nineteenth century; though they realised it was an extensive landmass, they knew relatively little about its shape and circumference. It was generally considered that New Holland was a single continent, but this had not been proven. Australia, along with Africa, represented what Dane Kennedy has recently termed the last blank spaces in world geographic knowledge.⁴⁴ Such blankness helped to justify continuing voyages of discovery to the southern hemisphere.⁴⁵ The shape of the world was a critical question in Enlightenment thinking: only accurate geographical fieldwork, leading to improved, reliable mapping, could provide a definitive answer.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Flinders, *A Voyage to Terra Australis*, vol. I, xlvi–xlvii, lxxxii.

⁴² Gerritsen, 'Getting the Strait Facts Straight': 11–17.

⁴³ For individual maps of Australia in the 1790s published in books, see T. M. Perry and Dorothy F. Prescott, *A Guide to Maps of Australia in Books Published 1780–1830* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1996).

⁴⁴ Dane Kennedy, *The Last Blank Spaces: Exploring Africa and Australia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 16; T. M. Perry, 'Introduction', in *Drawings by William Westall: Landscape Artist on Board H.M.S. Investigator during the Circumnavigation of Australia by Captain Matthew Flinders R.N. in 1801–1803*, eds T. M. Perry and D. H. Simpson (London: Royal Commonwealth Society, 1962), 3.

⁴⁵ Paul Longley Arthur, *Virtual Voyages: Travel Writing and the Antipodes 1605–1837* (London: Anthem Press, 2010), 51.

⁴⁶ Charles W. J. Withers, *Placing the Enlightenment: Thinking Geographically about the Age of Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 17.

Geographical understanding of Australia before Flinders sailed to New South Wales in the mid-1790s was largely confined to knowledge of its coastline, as the interior had been barely explored except for the hinterland of Port Jackson.⁴⁷ Some cartographers were suspicious of the accuracy of Dutch maps of Australia. This was particularly the case with Aaron Arrowsmith, who published maps of Terra Australis and many other parts of the world and who was the main map publisher with whom Flinders was associated. Arrowsmith, regarded as the foremost British cartographer of his time, concentrated on producing large-scale maps of the latest geographical discoveries in different parts of the world. He prided himself on basing his cartography on verified facts based on fieldwork by explorers.⁴⁸ He exercised precision in his mapmaking, eliminated geographical speculation, and set great store by accurate data. More than most of his contemporaries, he altered his plates to introduce corrections when they were made necessary by new data or to add new geographical discoveries as he became aware of them.⁴⁹

The emphasis on Arrowsmith is crucial in this context because Flinders largely relied on Arrowsmith's maps to provide accurate information on the coastal geography of Australia. On the *Investigator* expedition, Flinders had copies both of Arrowsmith's *Chart of the World on Mercator's projection, exhibiting all the new discoveries to the present time ...* (1790), and of his *Chart of the Pacific Ocean* (1798).⁵⁰ These are the two major maps including Australia that Flinders took with him on the voyage, apart from the Thévenot map mentioned below.⁵¹ This means that he ignored most maps of Australia that were the product of armchair geography. These, presumably, included the eight maps that Gerritsen consulted in the National Library of Australia's collections, none of which are by Arrowsmith.

Flinders, like Cook before him, had a scientifically-based preference for minimalist maps. In the years either side of 1800 Arrowsmith was the one British cartographer basing his maps on scientific data about geographical discovery, and Flinders shared this passion for precise geographical knowledge. Alexander Dalrymple, the hydrographer to the Admiralty, had influenced both Flinders and Arrowsmith. It may have been through him that Flinders and Arrowsmith had first become acquainted. Arrowsmith worked in the Hydrographic Office with Dalrymple in 1795 and 1796 and followed Dalrymple's frequently enunciated view that all unverified coastline should be rendered blank on

⁴⁷ Exploration of the interior of Australia was, of course, to prove a protracted process.

⁴⁸ R. V. Tooley, 'Aaron Arrowsmith', *The Map Collector* 9 (1979): 19–22; Laurence Worms and Ashley Boynton-Williams, *British Map Engravers: A Dictionary of Engravers, Lithographers and Their Principal Employers to 1850* (London: Rare Book Society, 2011), 25–6; Greg Wood, 'Successive States: Aaron Arrowsmith's Charts of the Pacific Ocean, 1798–1832', *The Globe* 70 (2012): 1–17.

⁴⁹ Coolie Verner, 'The Arrowsmith Firm and the Cartography of Canada', *The Canadian Cartographer* 8, no. 1 (1971): 1–7. The precision of Arrowsmith's mapmaking is evident in the *Memoir relative to the Construction of the Map of Scotland published by A. Arrowsmith in the year 1807* (London: Aaron Arrowsmith, 1809).

⁵⁰ Morgan, *Australia Circumnavigated*, vol. II, 513.

⁵¹ For a complete list of the maps and charts Flinders took on the voyage, see *ibid.*, vol. II, 513–14.

maps.⁵² Flinders had visited Dalrymple in the Hydrographic Office before setting sail in the *Investigator*, and was provided with 'every certain information relating to New Holland'.⁵³

Flinders shared Arrowsmith's scepticism about the validity of existing cartographic representations of Australia's coastline, and concurred that geographical knowledge needed to be based on verifiable facts achieved through exploration.⁵⁴ In particular, Flinders questioned the accuracy of the Dutch charting of the coastline of the Gulf of Carpentaria because of the absence of records from Tasman's voyage in this region. Flinders had on board the *Investigator* a translation of Tasman's printed instructions for his voyage made by Dalrymple.⁵⁵ But the Dutch map produced after the voyage was unsupported by other documentary materials and, in Flinders' words, 'was considered little better than a representation of fairy land'.⁵⁶ William Dampier, on a late seventeenth-century voyage to western Australia, had used Tasman's map, but he was critical of its accuracy. He believed Tasman's drawing of a continuous coastline for northwest Australia omitted a series of islands and that somewhere behind Rosemary Island was an extensive channel that connected with the southern and eastern coasts of Terra Australis. Dampier suspected Tasman had not sailed as closely to the Australian coast as his marked track indicated.⁵⁷ No exploration or mapping of the Gulf of Carpentaria had been undertaken between the voyages by Tasman and Flinders.

Flinders' main source for the Gulf of Carpentaria on the *Investigator* expedition was a map produced in 1663 by the French mapmaker Melchisédech Thévenot, who had copied it from Joan Blaeu's world map of 1648 on the floor of the great hall of Amsterdam city hall.⁵⁸ Dalrymple had supplied a copy of this map to Flinders.⁵⁹ The Thévenot map had been copied to form the basis of the best-known British map of Terra Australis. This was Emanuel Bowen's *Hollandia Nova-Terra Australis* (1744), later published in Thomas Bankes' *New System of*

⁵² Andrew Cook, 'Alexander Dalrymple and the Hydrographic Office', in *Pacific Empires: Essays in Honour of Glyndwr Williams*, eds Alan Frost and Jane Samson (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1999), 58.

⁵³ ML, Matthew Flinders, Private Journal in *HMS Investigator*, 2 vols, vol. I, f. 21.

⁵⁴ Flinders liaised closely with the Arrowsmith firm as he was preparing materials for *A Voyage to Terra Australis*: see Anthony J. Brown and Gillian Dooley, eds, *Matthew Flinders Private Journal 1803–1814* (Adelaide: Friends of the State Library of South Australia, 2008), 367, 442, 475, 484.

⁵⁵ Tasman's instructions are preserved in proof sheets found in Dalrymple's 'Collections concerning Papua' in Sir Joseph Banks' Library (BL shelf mark 435.k.13).

⁵⁶ Flinders, *A Voyage to Terra Australis*, vol. II, 228.

⁵⁷ G. Arnold Wood, *The Discovery of Australia* (1922; rev. edn, Melbourne: Macmillan of Australia, 1969), 339; Glyndwr Williams, 'New Holland to New South Wales: The English Approaches', in *Terra Australis to Australia*, eds Alan Frost and Glyndwr Williams (Melbourne: Oxford University Press in association with the Australian Academy of the Humanities, 1988), 129. Dampier was wrong about the channel but was correct in suggesting that Tasman had missed numerous offshore islands in the Gulf of Carpentaria.

⁵⁸ The Thévenot version distinguishes between *Hollandia Nova* and *Terra Australis*, but there is no such division on Blaeu's map: see Damian Cole, 'No Longer Incognita', and Martin Woods, 'Terre Australe, East Coast of New Holland', in *Mapping Our World: Terra Incognita to Australia* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2013), 143, 182.

⁵⁹ Ingleton, *Matthew Flinders*, 207. I have not been able to establish whether Flinders had a reproduction of the original Thévenot map or whether Dalrymple gave him the version by Bowen.

Geography (1785).⁶⁰ This depicted a continuous coast for the Gulf of Carpentaria; the shape of the east coast, unknown when the map was originally drawn, was omitted.⁶¹ It was possible that the Gulf of Carpentaria coast existed as shown on the Thévenot map, but it was equally possible that the Gulf was not a gulf but an opening of a passage leading to the south.⁶² Significantly, Arrowsmith's *Chart of the Pacific Ocean* (1798) had not marked the entire north coastline of Australia as being continuous.

Given Flinders and Arrowsmith's reservations about the accuracy of Dutch mapping of the Gulf of Carpentaria, and the fact that there was no accurate mapping of Australia's entire coastline, based on empirical investigation, before the *Investigator* expedition, it is clear that Flinders was putting forward a legitimate question in his letter to Banks of 6 September 1800 about the possibility of a north-south strait dividing Terra Australis. That Gerritsen questioned the motives of Flinders in making this suggestion by referring to a small selection of maps he found in the National Library of Australia is to ignore the fact that, as mentioned above, most maps of Australia in 1800 were based on theoretical geography, and also to pay no attention to the one cartographer, Arrowsmith, whose maps Flinders took with him on the *Investigator*. That Flinders failed, during his circumnavigation, to find such a strait, was a great disappointment to him, as it would have been a major geographical discovery; but the fact that he definitively proved that Terra Australis was a single landmass, not two landmasses, separated by a strait, was an important empirical finding about Australia's geography.

III

The above discussion has established that Gerritsen was misleading when he suggested that Flinders' reference to a strait dividing Australia was a deliberate myth deployed to attract the attention of Banks. It has also shown that Gerritsen was mistaken in suggesting that maps depicting a continuous coastline for the Gulf of Carpentaria, with no evidence of such a strait, had settled this matter before the *Investigator's* voyage began. To be sure, the letter of 6 September was an example of Flinders' initiative and ambition: he wanted to gain recognition, as his written remarks elsewhere suggest, as a notable maritime explorer.⁶³ But reference back to the contents of his letter will show that Flinders had broad, legitimate questions about the shape and extent of Australia's coastal geography

⁶⁰ For Bowen's reliance on Blaeu, see Kees Zandvliet, 'Golden Opportunities in Geopolitics: Cartography and the Dutch East India Company during the Lifetime of Abel Tasman', in *Terra Australis: The Furthest Shore*, eds William Eisler and Bernard Smith (Sydney: International Cultural Corporation of Australia, 1988), 80.

⁶¹ T. M. Knight, 'From Terra Incognita to New Holland', *Cartography* 6, no. 2 (1987): 89.

⁶² Wood, *The Discovery of Australia*, 339.

⁶³ This has been pointed out effectively in Perry, 'Matthew Flinders – The Man', 51, 57.

that were of considerable importance for British imperial expansion. Some details of these considerations can be supplied by way of conclusion.

One point worth noting, which Gerritsen slides over, is that Flinders' letter does not categorically state that he is exclusively suggesting a dividing strait might be found in Australia. His words are as follows: 'probably it will be found, that an extensive strait separates New South Wales from New Holland by the way of the Gulph of Carpentaria; or perhaps a southern gulph may only peninsulate New South Wales'.⁶⁴ Gerritsen ignored the last part of this sentence in making his charges against Flinders. But, in this comment, Flinders demonstrated his knowledge of what was certainly known about Australia's geography in 1800. His scepticism about existing maps depicting the Gulf of Carpentaria, and therefore his reliance on Arrowsmith's maps, has already been discussed in detail. But the reference to the possibility of a gulf penetrating Australia's southern coast reflected his knowledge that no maritime explorers had yet surveyed or mapped that coast – known to contemporaries as 'the unknown coast' – beyond the islands of St Peter and St Francis, which was the extremity of exploration by seventeenth-century Dutch navigators. Since their investigations, which dated back to the 1620s, no other European navigators had explored further along that coast.⁶⁵ Flinders knew that contemporary maps of Australia, in consequence, often depicted the 'unknown coast' with either a blank or an undulating conjectural line, without any gulfs, that claimed no factual supporting basis.⁶⁶

Flinders' letter of 6 September, in fact, had the broader purpose of suggesting that a thorough investigation of Australia's coastal geography could have great benefits for British imperial endeavours in the southern hemisphere. 'It cannot be doubted', Flinders observed in another section of his letter,

that a very great part of that still extensive country remains either totally unknown, or has been partially examined at a time when navigation was much less advanced than at present. The interests of geography and natural history in general, and of the British nation in particular, seem to require, that this only remaining considerable part of the globe should be thoroughly explored.⁶⁷

Apart from focusing on whether Australia was divided by a strait or had a deep gulf penetrating its southern coast, Flinders also drew Banks' attention to three other significant matters. First, advances in scientific knowledge would be possible if an expert in natural history could be sent on a voyage around Australia. Second, navigation would benefit from further knowledge of Torres Strait.

⁶⁴ Flinders to Banks, 6 September 1800, in Brunton, ed., *Matthew Flinders*, 51.

⁶⁵ Ernest Scott, *Terre Napoléon: A History of French Exploration and Projects in Australia*, 2nd edn (London: Methuen & Co., 1911), 27.

⁶⁶ E.g. Thomas Conder, *A New and Accurate Chart of the Discoveries of Capt'n Cook & other Later Circumnavigators: Exhibiting the Whole Coast of New South Wales ...* (London: Hogg, 1794); and Robert Wilkinson, *A new map of the empires, states, provinces &c of Asia: including also the Turkish & Russian dominions in Europe & New Holland* (London, 1798).

⁶⁷ Flinders to Banks, 6 September 1800, in Brunton, ed., *Matthew Flinders*, 51.

Third, a circumnavigatory voyage could provide firmer knowledge about future communications between settlements in Australia and the English East India Company's commerce.⁶⁸

The overall content of Flinders' letter to Banks, it can be seen, ranged much more widely than just concentrating on the issue of a dividing strait. On the contrary, it offered a well-informed series of suggestions about the imperial and commercial advantages that could accrue to Britain by filling in gaps in the knowledge of Australian navigation and geography. Gerritsen's critique of Flinders' letter therefore represents an attempt to debunk a historical myth where, in fact, no myth exists. Flinders, of course, did gain the backing of Banks and the Admiralty to carry out a circumnavigation of Australia in the *Investigator*, and the voyage, despite being curtailed before the west and northwest coasts of Australia could be explored, owing to the unseaworthy state of the ship, made many significant findings about Australia's coastal geography.⁶⁹

Flinders' detailed surveying and mapping of Australia's coastal geography, based on his hydrographical expertise, confirmed many points he had raised in his letter to Banks. He found there was no dividing strait through Australia, and that the seventeenth-century Dutch mapping of the Gulf of Carpentaria was broadly correct in outline though very deficient in details of rivers and off-shore islands. His meticulous charting and navigation, undertaken with the latest scientific instruments in a running survey of Australia's coast, were able to establish those matters beyond doubt. Flinders navigated as close to the shore as he could in the *Investigator* but undertook expeditions in a whaleboat around many offshore islands where access was needed in a smaller vessel. He compared his findings with books and charts already available for some parts of the coast, notably making use of material on Cook's voyage in the *Endeavour* on the east coast in 1770. But most of his nautical surveying was based upon his own meticulous field research.⁷⁰

Flinders showed, for the first time, that two deep gulfs penetrated the south Australian coast – Spencer Gulf and Gulf St Vincent. The existence of a gulf or gulfs had been suggested as a possibility, as noted above, in his letter to Banks. Flinders surveyed and mapped almost all of the 'unknown coast' save for a small section where he was pre-empted by the rival French expedition under Baudin.⁷¹ Flinders was the first navigator to steer a safe passage through the Great Barrier Reef, which he named. He found a navigable route through Torres Strait that was important for future navigation; and he left instructions about how this treacherous sea channel could be navigated safely. This helped to promote Torres Strait as a viable shipping route in the nineteenth century for ships sailing back from Australia to Europe, saving over a month's sailing

⁶⁸ Ibid., 51.

⁶⁹ Kenneth Morgan, 'Sir Joseph Banks and the *Investigator* Expedition: Geographical Knowledge, Natural History, and Australian Exploration', *International Journal of Maritime History* 26, no. 2 (2014): 235–64.

⁷⁰ Morgan, *Australia Circumnavigated*, vol. II, 197–8.

⁷¹ Ibid., vol. I, 291–360.

time by obviating the need for vessels to sail around the eastern end of New Guinea into the Indian Ocean.⁷²

Flinders took a party of scientific gentlemen with him in the *Investigator*, who made important findings in botany and zoology, and who contributed to the visual documentation of Australia's flora, fauna and landscape. The botanist Brown gathered many specimens of plants, insects and birds that he brought back to England for identification and classification. Numerous plants that he collected were deposited at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. The written data that Brown produced were deposited in the Natural History Museum, London. Brown's pioneering work on new genera and new species has continued to this day, as botanists in London and Australia continue to benefit from his field research. Ferdinand Bauer's painstakingly prepared and exquisite colour drawings of Australian plants have been acclaimed for their three-dimensional quality and botanical accuracy of the smallest parts of plant structure. William Westall's engraved paintings for *A Voyage to Terra Australis* and his drawings of examples of Australian flora and fauna have left a fine artistic legacy from the *Investigator* expedition.⁷³

In 1814, Flinders eventually produced, after various misfortunes, a large two-volume account of his circumnavigation in *A Voyage to Terra Australis*, and a detailed set of accompanying maps in an atlas that gave the most accurate depiction of Australia's coastal geography ever assembled. The atlas was produced by Arrowsmith, working in close conjunction with Flinders and Banks. Great care was taken in both the volumes and the atlas to record Flinders' navigational and scientific findings as accurately as possible and to set them within the context of prior voyages to Terra Australis stretching back to seventeenth-century Dutch expeditions.⁷⁴ Between 1814 and 1832, Arrowsmith produced several updated editions of his *Chart of the Pacific Ocean*, with additions to Flinders' atlas.⁷⁵

Rather than being someone who wished to perpetuate a historical myth, Flinders' letter to Banks of 6 September 1800 and his subsequent career as a maritime explorer demonstrate that he was motivated by a strong desire to cast aside conjectures and increase certain knowledge about Australia's geography. To re-read the letter is to remind oneself of the intelligence of Flinders' grasp of what matters still needed to be confirmed. Flinders was consistent in following through the plans he had outlined to Banks, and he combined scholarly research with

⁷² Flinders, *A Voyage to Terra Australis*, vol. I, xiv–xlv, vol. II, 111–19, 335–43; Kenneth Morgan, 'From Cook to Flinders: The Navigation of Torres Strait', *International Journal of Maritime History* 27, no. 1 (2015): 54–8.

⁷³ The findings of the scientific gentlemen on the *Investigator* expedition are documented in T. G. Vallance, D. T. Moore and E. W. Groves, eds, *Nature's Investigator: The Diary of Robert Brown in Australia, 1801–1805* (Canberra: Australian Biological Resources Study, 2001). The contributions of Bauer and Westall to the voyage are assessed in Marlene J. Norst, *Ferdinand Bauer: The Australian Natural History Drawings* (London: British Museum, 1989), and in Perry and Simpson, *Drawings by William Westall*.

⁷⁴ Miriam Estensen, *The Life of Matthew Flinders* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2002), 442.

⁷⁵ Wood, 'Successive States': 15.

active exploration to account for many previously unknown features of Australia's coastal geography in a precise, illuminating way. Flinders' career as a maritime explorer showed that he made substantial, lasting achievements that provided new knowledge of Australia's coastal geography based on accurate hydrographical surveying and field research.

Kenneth Morgan
Brunel University London
Email: kenneth.morgan@brunel.ac.uk