Dumont d'Urville 1790-1842

OLIVE WRIGHT

Jules Sebastien Cesar Dumont d'Urville whose name is well known in New Zealand was born and brought up in the heart of Normandy, near the lovely cities of Bayeux and Caen. He was a great scholar and a great scientist; linguistic studies ranging from Greek and Hebrew to the dialects of remote tribes on the islands of Oceania, interested him no less than the scientific study of biology and marine geography. Both in his outlook and in the quality of his mind, d'Urville strikes one as a man of the Renaissance who finds to his hand the tools and resources of a modern age. He understood men and knew how to command the loyal service of eminent colleagues. Dumont d'Urville visited New Zealand in the course of each of his voyages and in his dealings with the natives showed a remarkable attitude of sympathetic understanding and justice combined with caution. Of his three great voyages—as second-in-command under Duperrey, 1822-24, as Commander of the Astrolabe, 1826-29, as Commander of an Antarctic Expedition and voyage of discovery, 1837-40—the second probably represents his highest achievement. Certainly if one adds the publication of "The Voyage of the Astrolabe" which occupied him from 1829-1835, it constitutes a vast undertaking, brilliantly carried out. The extract, dated January 28, 1827, has been chosen in the hope that even in translation it may reveal something of the personality of Dumont d'Urville.

January 28: "At last I saw the dawn heralding a day of happy auspices with a promise of a favourable wind. In order not to neglect any precautions that it was within my power to take, as early as half-past four I went to the end of the S.E. side of the channel and I climbed right to the top of the bluff which overlooks it. It was not at all easy by reason of its steep sides and the very dense bracken that covers it to a certain distance. I managed it, however, and looking straight down on to the channel from this hill, I was convinced that it could be navigated, if great precautions were taken. Yet I did not shut my eyes to the fact that this enterprise might have sinister consequences . . . . but I returned to the ship quite determined to tempt fortune.

At seven o'clock the kedge anchor was raised and dropped twelve yards nearer the ship; soon afterwards, as the wind seemed steady and moderate in the W.S.W. and, moreover, the tide slack, I decided to get underweigh at once, so as to have the more complete mastery of my operation. We had taken in the hawser astern, which meant that we were facing in the right direction, and also that we were in the exact position to catch the wind immediately in the sails as we weighed

anchor: all this was carried out with great rapidity. At the same moment, the mizzensail, the mizzen-topmast staysail, the foresail and the foretopsail were trimmed, and for a few minutes we held our course very well; but just at the moment when we were about to enter the channel, the wind fell and the tide, coming up with a rush, made us swing to leeward. In vain I immediately ordered the helm hard down and all the sails astern to be taken in, in order to stand in to the coast on the right, as if to touch it, as the situation demanded. The corvette did not respond, and, at the mercy of the tidal current she could not escape being carried on to the last rocks of the reefs over which I knew that there was only ten to twelve feet of water. Soon the Astrolabe struck twice: the first shock was slight, the second time a sinister sound of cracking went through her, then came a long shiver, with an unmistakable pause in the progress of the corvette and a heavy list to leeward, which might well make one fear that she would stay on the rocks and go to pieces. The crew at this moment gave an involuntary cry of terror. 'It's nothing; we have cleared it,' I shouted, to reassure them. In fact, the tide, still bearing the ship with it, prevented her from remaining on the fatal rocks; moreover, the wind got up again, we could steer, and very soon, set free from any fears, with all the sails set, we entered the peaceful waters of Admiralty Bay. The only damage was where the keelson had lost one or two scraps knocked off by the collision and these floated along in the wake of the ship.

Absolutely absorbed by the business of handling the ship, I could not take note of what was happening round me. But those of my companions who could give more attention to it assured me that it was a most impressive sight to see the Astrolabe, at one moment lying on one side as if about to be swallowed up by the whirlpools that surrounded her, lift herself by a graceful movement and advance majestically through the midst of the waters from which the fury had departed.

To preserve the memory of the passage of the Astrolabe, I gave the name of French Pass to this dangerous strait; but, except in a case of urgency, I should not advise anyone to attempt it, and even then it would be necessary to have a steady wind and almost to scud before the wind. For the rest, the maps and plans that M. Guilbert constructed from his survey of the whole of this part of the strait will make navigation much easier for those who come after us in these regions."