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The ornithology of the Baudin expedition (1800-1804)

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THE BAUDIN EXPEDITION

to Australia and Timor of 1800-1804 has largely been overlooked by the ornithological community, due to the effects of the Napoleonic Wars, personal rivalries, the death of Baudin himself during the expedition, and the lack of curatorial knowledge. The Baudin collection was the first large, significant and relatively complete collection of natural history specimens ever to arrive at the Muséum national d'histoire naturelle in Paris. A fair number of the specimens were to become the models of species 'new to science', and they even included at least two taxa that are now extinct. The importance of the collection was at first not fully understood and its specimens became dispersed all over Europe, ending up in collections such as Blois, La Châtre, Edinburgh, Florence, Geneva, Leiden, Nancy, Paris, Pavia and Vienna. Nevertheless, the expedition paved the way for the 'father of Australian ornithology', John Gould, who embarked on his journey to Australia almost forty years later, in 1838.

This dissertation relates the story of the remarkable avian collection acquired during the Baudin expedition, its historical context and importance, and the challenges of its preservation. The vicissitudes of history form the backdrop for the author's fascination with reconstructing the expedition's exploits and the difficulties involved in it. Over the years only small parts of the Baudin collection have been researched and publicized. This dissertation aims to provide a complete, detailed and comprehensive catalogue of its ornithological exploits. By bringing together what is known about the collection and its dispersal, it will hopefully take research a step further and stimulate the search for the pieces that are still missing.



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