



## Travel Writing/Writing Travel to Report: Matthew Flinders to Evan Nepean from Coepang Bay Timor<sup>1</sup>

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Texts authored by maritime explorers occupy a special place in the body of travel literature in English dealing with the exploration of the Pacific in the modern period. This article focuses on a specimen of scientific travel writing in epistolary form authored by Commander Matthew Flinders, the officer under whose command HMS *Investigator* completed the first circumnavigation of Australia in 1803. I analyse Matthew Flinders's official despatch to Evan Nepean, Secretary of the Admiralty at the time, as an example of early nineteenth-century epistolary travel writing, paying special attention to the textual strategies employed by Flinders in order to produce a coherent and accurate travel account, on the one hand, and to negotiate his professional status and persona with his interlocutor(s), on the other.

**Keywords:** maritime exploration, Pacific, travel, scientific travel writing, epistolary travel writing, official correspondence, Matthew Flinders.

### Introduction

The substantial body of travel literature related to the exploration of the Pacific region, produced in English in the modern period, is exceptionally heterogeneous.<sup>2</sup> A special place in this rich collection of texts is occupied by the writings of explorers on British state-sponsored voyages of discovery, who were required to meticulously document the progress of their voyages in the South Seas meticulously for the benefit of the metropolitan and colonial governments. Captain Matthew Flinders (1774 -1814), under whose command the first circumnavigation of Australia was completed in 1803, was among those British seamen, who “carried a particular burden to make a public display of words and marks, on deck and on paper” (Phillips 113), by producing a wide range of texts related to his voyage. These writings include ship logbooks, private journals, official correspondence and a memoir as well as a published travel account.<sup>3</sup> This article is concerned with one specific sample of Flinders's travel writing in the epistolary format: a specimen of official correspondence in which the officer reports back to the Admiralty on the progress of his voyage.

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Lamb, Valerie Smith, and Nicholas Thomas offer a critical anthology of South Sea travel writing with a selection of texts produced by different groups of travellers: explorers and adventures, beachcombers, and missionaries as well as literary authors. See also Elizabeth A. Bohls and Ian Duncan, *Travel Writing, 1700 – 1830. An Anthology*, esp. pp. 421–494.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Morgan's prefatory chapter in the recently published transcribed text of Flinders's fair journals (2015) offers an excellent introduction to the background, chronological progress, and the main scientific outcomes of Flinders's circumnavigation.

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Flinders's voyage of exploration on board HMS *Investigator* started from Spithead on 18<sup>th</sup> July 1801. Its main objectives concerned the investigation of Australia's coastal hydrography, geography, and natural history. The *Investigator* reached the Australian continent on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1801, sailing past Cape Leeuwin, the continent's south-westernmost point. After successfully completing the first part of the voyage of exploration in early May 1802, the expedition departed for the second and final part of its voyage in July 1802. Sailing from Port Jackson<sup>4</sup> up the east coast of Australia, Flinders and his crew were able to complete a difficult, but successful first-ever circumnavigation of Australia, with the *Investigator* making her return to Port Jackson almost one year later, in June 1803. In addition to proving conclusively that Australia was a continent, other significant navigational achievements of Flinders's expedition included the discovery of a safe and expeditious route through Torres Strait, the charting of the outer route of the Great Barrier Reef and a thorough investigation of the Gulf of Carpentaria, conducted, for the most part, under extremely difficult conditions (Morgan 28–45).

During and after his voyaging round Australia, Flinders was able to produce an “amount of original material in the form of journals, record books, and manuscript charts [that] is unmatched in the period” (Barritt 14). The main texts in question are represented by Flinders's 1801–1803 rough journals (see Barritt 1–15; Morgan 92–93), his fair journals, compiled during his detention at Île-de-France<sup>5</sup> and discussed by Kenneth Morgan (see “Textual” 88–91), the *Memoir Explaining the Construction of the Charts of Australia*, reprinted in Morgan's *Australia Circumnavigated*, which was also finalized during the time spent in detention,<sup>6</sup> and the two volumes of *A Voyage to Terra Australis*, the official published account of the *Investigator*'s voyage, completed shortly before the navigator's premature death in July 1814.<sup>7</sup> Prior to the start of the voyage, Flinders had received detailed instructions from the Commissioners in the office of the Lord High Admiral about the various tasks he was required to carry out. His main responsibilities consisted in conducting hydrographical surveys and charting the Australian coastline, as well as overseeing the work of an accompanying team of scientific gentlemen, who were responsible for the study of the continent's flora and fauna (Morgan, “Introduction” 9–12). The full text of the instructions issued by the Commissioners was reprinted in the first volume of *A Voyage to Terra Australis* (Flinders 8–12). These contained, among other directives, the following instruction:

During your continuance on the service above-mentioned, you are, by all proper opportunities, to send to our secretary for our information, accounts of your proceedings and copies of the surveys and drawings which you shall have made, and such papers as the Naturalist and the Painters employed on board may think proper to send home; and upon your arrival in England you are immediately to repair to this office in order to lay before us a full account of your proceedings in the whole course of your voyage; taking care before you leave the sloop to demand from the officers and petty officers the log books and journals which they may have kept and such drawings and charts as they may have taken, and to seal them up for our inspection. (Flinders 11)

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<sup>4</sup> The place of the second British settlement in New South Wales. This is where, on 18<sup>th</sup> January 1788, “[o]n a space cleared in the wooded slope that is now central Sydney, the British flag was hoisted as the commander, Captain Arthur Phillip, took formal possession of the new colony” (Macintyre 17).

<sup>5</sup> The *Investigator* was decommissioned shortly after Flinders's return to Port Jackson in July 1803. Flinders immediately set out to travel back to England, where he hoped to obtain a better ship, with the view of returning to Australia to continue his survey. However, a series of unfortunate events, such as, most importantly, his detention by French authorities at Île-de-France, delayed his return to England until October 1810 (Morgan 45–55). It was between December 1803 and June 1810, during Flinders's long confinement on Île-de-France, that the explorer was able to compile, revise, and finalize a number of documents pertaining to his most important expedition (see Barritt).

<sup>6</sup> This document is particularly important as it was here that Flinders, for the first time, consistently used the term “Australia” to refer to the continent (see Mack).

<sup>7</sup> The detailed bibliography in Morgan's *Matthew Flinders. Maritime Explorer of Australia* (2016) contains information about other types of documents (for instance, private and official correspondence) related to the expedition.

One of Flinders's tasks during the voyage, as this extract makes clear, was to send detailed despatches to Evan Nepean (1755 – 1822), Secretary of the Admiralty at the time, whenever an opportunity for doing so would present itself. In what follows, I analyse one of such official reports sent by Flinders to Nepean from Timor on 5<sup>th</sup> April 1803, during the final phase of his voyage. On the one hand, this letter represents a specimen of historical official correspondence, an epistolary sub-genre whose main characteristics have been identified as being “public, formal, conventional, and transactional in nature” (Dossena and Fitzmaurice 8). On the other hand, given that the document's main purpose was to report on the progress of the voyage of exploration, this letter can be analysed as an example of early nineteenth-century scientific travel writing in epistolary form.

## Epistolary Travel Writing in English: Some Considerations

As defined by Gabriella Del Lungo Camiciotti, epistolary discourse

is a fully fledged textual genre in its own right, as it is distinguishable from other types of discourse by specific pronominal and linguistic features (Altman), which render it a unique genre (Dossena and Del Lungo Camiciotti); it is multifunctional and extremely varied in that the official and practical use of the letter has developed over the ages and given rise to different textual subgenres. (17–18)<sup>8</sup>

Del Lungo Camiciotti discusses a number of epistolary subgenres such as the Pauline epistles, the medieval letter as an administrative document, seventeenth-century scientific correspondence and newsletters, the eighteenth-century epistolary novel, and later personal and commercial correspondence (18). As one of the earliest forms of writing (Bazerman 16) and one that is also “peculiarly versatile and diverse” (Barton and Hall 1), the epistolary form was adapted and used by travel writers as far back as the fourth century CE when the Spanish nun Egeria went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and wrote back to her “sisters” at home (see Blanton 6). The predilection of numerous later travel writers for the letter form may be attributed to its “porous quality” and openness to other kinds of writing to which Liz Stanley has drawn attention (218). On the other hand, Michael T. Bravo has identified the travel letter as a vehicle for achieving accuracy in scientific travel writing (“Precision and Curiosity” 176).<sup>9</sup>

The “prehistory of the travelogue in Europe,” according to Barbara Korte (21, italic in the original), starts in the late Middle Ages. This period witnessed the publication of numerous travel accounts authored by merchants, missionaries, and pilgrims. Accounts of pilgrimages, for example, were among the most popular textual subgenres of medieval travel writing. This form of travel writing gradually became specialized and standardized, as it was defined by its focus on “the description of places and a relation of the holy story associated with them” (Korte 24–25). In the early modern period, as Rubiés has observed, the practice of travel writing participated in and supported the ongoing transformation of the European system of knowledge by “generat[ing] a fundamental set of genres which contributed powerfully to the multiplication of observations of various kinds” (147). The first major European “discoveries” overseas, which occurred in the period between the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, stimulated “the real expansion of the genre” (Rubiés 151). In Korte's description of this development, reporting home about “the ‘discovery’, exploration and colonization of America” provided a fresh impetus for the diversification and change in the textual strategies employed in European travel writing: travellers now were compelled “to scrutinize this foreign world, perceive it in all its empirical qualities – and write home about it in meticulous detail” (30).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> To this list Bazerman, for instance, adds “the patent, originally known as letters patent; stockholders' reports evolving from letters to stockholders; and internal corporate reporting and record forms regularizing internal corporate correspondence” (15). For an overview of these developments, see also Palander-Collin.

<sup>9</sup> In his “Indigenous Authorship, Voyaging and Discovery,” Bravo discusses eighteenth-century missionary inspections, natural histories, colonial survey narratives, and accounts of geographical exploration and conquest.

<sup>10</sup> Here Korte quotes Stephen Greenblatt's description of this development “as a shift ‘from medieval wonder as a sign of dispossession to Renaissance wonder as an agent of appropriation’” (Greenblatt 24).

Contemporaneously, the early modern period saw the production of the first great collections of travel writings.<sup>11</sup> The publication of these extensive compilations, produced in expensive multi-volume editions, catapulted travel literature into the limelight, elevating this body of writing into one of the central components of European culture.<sup>12</sup> Yet even with the diversification of the genre, discussed by Rubiés, the epistolary form continued to compete with more recent forms of travel writing, such as encyclopaedic compilations, philosophical essays, and theoretical treatises on travel. Christopher Columbus's writings in epistolary form, documenting his four voyages to the "new" world (Blanton 8), together with Amerigo Vespucci's "equally popular letters" (Adams 41) are but two outstanding examples in a series of key epistolary travel texts produced at that time.

The new focus on the accurate, authoritative recording of empirical observations in popular published reports of actual journeys in the early modern period determined the emergence of the empirically oriented travelogue (Korte 29–35). The popularity of this form of travel writing, characterized by its "heavy emphasis on the object, that is, the country travelled" (Korte 35), meant that the new kind of travelogue quickly acquired the status of one of the main genres of travel writing in English. A symbolic mark of this paradigmatic shift was the remarkable success of William Dampier's *New Voyage Round the World* (1697), an empirically oriented travel account written by "an adventurer without much education and with no experience of publishing [who] gradually shaped the voluminous notes of his sea travels into the book the age required and which everyone read" (Edwards 2).

However, it appears that, as a result of the institutionalization of the Grand Tour account (Korte 39), authors of eighteenth-century scientific travel accounts started to be influenced by a general predilection for personal, subjective experience.<sup>13</sup> This emphasis was reflected in the proliferation of such autobiographical forms of travel writing as letters, diaries, and journals. In Clare Brant's 2006 study, travel letters are discussed as one of the most significant forms of eighteenth-century travel writing, formally distinguishable from other autobiographical genres. Unlike, for example, diaries or journals, the presence of the (nominal) interlocutor, or addressee in travel letters, constrained the travel writer to cast his or her reflections "into sociable form" (Brant 229). To borrow Brant's terminology, travel writing in epistolary form can be characterized, on the one hand, by its "explicit communicativeness" (229) and, on the other hand, by providing a format in which "wandering writers' minds [could be usefully concentrated]" (229). Moreover, as an autobiographical form, epistolary travel writing was "particularly suited to the immediate expression of personal experience" (Korte 53).

Eighteenth-century English travel letters participated in the booming culture of ubiquitous letter-writing. Contemporary epistolary guides, addressed to the members of the now literate "humbler classes" (Hornbeak 82), instructed their readers to be sincere and spontaneous in their writing. This is amply illustrated by the following extracts from *The Complete Letter-Writer: Containing Familiar Letters on the Most Common Occasions in Life, Also a Variety of Elegant Letters for the Direction and Embellishment of Style*, published anonymously in 1778, and *The Universal Letter-Writer: Or, New Art of Polite Correspondence* (1791) by the Rev. Thomas Cooke:

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<sup>11</sup> Rubiés discusses *Delle navigationi et viaggi* by Giovanni Battista Ramusio, whose first volume was published in 1550, and Richard Hakluyt's *Principall Navigations* (1598-1600), as examples of the most important of these travel compilations.

<sup>12</sup> In addition to empirically oriented travel accounts, more precise and elaborated atlases, maps, and globes (see Brotton), as well as various collections of voyage artefacts (see Lythberg), recorded new empirical knowledge about the "discovered" world.

<sup>13</sup> Already in late sixteenth-century England, one of the most popular forms of the new kind of treatise on travel, which catered to the needs of inexperienced gentlemen travelling to the continent, was that of "a 'personal letter' by an experienced relative or friend addressed to a younger traveller" (Rubiés 167). The Grand Tour account, in the period from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, became "an institutionalized form of travel for education," characterized by its "marked concern with the traveller's personal, subjective experience" (Korte 39). Korte thus connects the proliferation of scientific travel writing in autobiographical form with the institutionalization of the subjectively oriented Grand Tour account (53–61).

When you sit down to write a letter, remember that this sort of writing should be like conversation. Observe this, and you will be no more at a loss to write than you will be to speak to the person were he present; and this is nature without affectation, which, generally speaking, always pleases. (*The Complete* 8)

As letters are the copies of conversation, just consider what you would say to your friend if he was present, and write down the very words you would speak, which will render your epistle unaffected, and intelligible. (Cooke 18)

The pervasiveness of the “letters-as-conversation analogy”<sup>14</sup> (Smith, “Travel Narratives” 95) meant that travel letters, unlike non-epistolary travel texts, were typically reviewed by readers against the standards applied to collections of familiar non-travel letters, that is, by emphasizing the centrality of the writer’s “distinct authorial presence” (Smith, “Travel Narratives” 85). Consequently, the publication of popular (and less popular) eighteenth-century travel narratives in epistolary form generated a controversy on “what epistolarity should mean for documents with both a private and a public audience [implying] a larger cultural question of the public manifestation of a private self” (Smith, “Travel Narratives” 96).

At the turn of the nineteenth century, when Matthew Flinders embarked on his voyage of exploration, the range of popular subgenres of travel writing “span[ned] the full spectrum from extreme object to extreme subject orientation, and from sober instruction to entertainment and aesthetic delight” (Korte 81). As an officer in the Royal Navy, Flinders was a proficient letter writer acquainted with a variety of epistolary forms. These included formal reports in epistolary form that he was required to produce for his superiors, private letters that he would write to his family and friends, as well as hybrid forms at the intersection of public and private discourse (see Morgan, *Matthew Flinders*), which were typical of the second half of the eighteenth century (see Dossena, “‘Be Pleased’”; Dossena “‘We Beg’”). In the next section, I will analyse Matthew Flinders’s 1803 letter to the Secretary of the Admiralty as a specimen of historical English scientific travel writing in epistolary form. I will argue that this letter represents a particularly interesting case study in its quality of an official communication produced by the explorer to report to his superiors on the progress of the voyage. I will attempt to demonstrate how Flinders not only skilfully employs epistolary conventions in order to produce a coherent travel report, but how his familiarity with these conventions enables him to rhetorically employ “a particular ‘tone’” (Stanley 203) in order to negotiate his professional status and persona with his interlocutors.

### Reporting from Timor: Matthew Flinders to Evan Nepean

To Evan Nepean Esquire Admiralty Office, London

His Majesty’s sloop *Investigator* Coepang Bay Timor April 5 1803

Sir

I have to inform my Lords Commissioners that, on July 22 last, I put to sea from Port Jackson with His Majesty’s sloop under my command, and the colonial brig *Lady Nelson* commanded by lieutenant Murray. For the reasons mentioned in my letter of July 12, we proceeded to the northward, along the coast of New South Wales, to Herveys Bay; from which to Cape Palmerston the coast underwent a minute examination, the particulars of which will be found in the charts and are detailed in the inclosed part no.2. (Morgan, *Australia* 339)

As a material document, a letter “signals its epistolary purpose through its form or structure by being addressed to one person and signed by another (Dear A, Yours Z), although neither the signatory (or writer) nor the addressee (or reader) need necessarily be singular” (Stanley 207). Flinders’s letter to Evan Nepean,<sup>15</sup> as the extract above shows, contains a number of conventional epistolary elements: the

<sup>14</sup> An analogy that is easily traced back to Erasmus of Rotterdam and his influential 1522 treatise on letter writing entitled *Opus de conscribendis epistolis* (quoted in Boran et al. 58).

<sup>15</sup> The text of the letter, with the enclosures, was included in the manuscript version of Flinders’s fair journals and made available in the fair journals’ recent print edition (see Morgan, *Australia*). This document, however, was not reproduced in the original published version of the account of the *Investigator*’s voyage (see Flinders).

name of the addressee, as well as the date and place of writing are provided; the formal address term “Sir” is used; the opening paragraph starts with the formulaic string “I have to inform my Lords Commissioners,” which references the act of writing. The vocative “Sir” indicates the Secretary of the Admiralty as the sole formal recipient of the letter. However, the explicit address to the Lords Commissioners in the first line signals the sender’s awareness of the fact that the letter is not confidential and will be read by other people. The reference to the previous letter (“For the reasons mentioned in my letter of July 12”) and the information given about enclosed documents represent two additional conventional elements of formal epistolary discourse. The combination of these formal features qualifies Flinders’s letter as a specimen of early nineteenth-century official correspondence.

In their studies of the diachronic development of official letter writing, scholars such as Ursula Okulska, on the one hand, and Nicholas Brownlees, on the other, have identified the following components of the internal macrostructure of this type of correspondence: an opening, a narrative or reporting body part, and a closing.<sup>16</sup> Flinders’s letter adheres to these conventions: after the opening, discussed above, the letter contains a long body part, followed by a formal closing. In the body part, Flinders’s meticulous, accurate reporting on the progress of the voyage is substantiated by the inclusion of dates, other numerical data (measurements, coordinates, etc.), names of geographical locations, and the description of the commander’s actions undertaken in the process of surveying. These features testify to the importance of such official despatches in their function as “key instrument[s] of empire for describing, categorizing, and mapping the world which it aspired to possess” (Bravo, “Precision and Curiosity” 166).

In Alexander Bergs’s classification of socio-pragmatically motivated letter subtypes, reports are described as “neutral description[s] about some state of affairs” (40). In this case, Flinders’s main communicative goal is to transmit accurate information to his superiors about the progress of the second part of his voyage. More specifically, he reports on the surveying and charting of the coast he had carried out in the ten months since his ship’s departure from Port Jackson. In order to provide relevant and accurate information on this part of his voyage, Flinders must have selected and reworked data recorded in his ship logbooks and journals. The single-day ship logbook entries, following a standardized format, were arranged in strict chronological order, and the progress of Flinders’s epistolary travel report reflects this convention. Some important dates are given in the letter’s opening paragraph, and a closer analysis of the body part confirms that Flinders uses dates and other numerical data to organize the contents of his factual travel report in epistolary form.

The eighteen dates Flinders uses to structure the contents of the letter start with 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1802, the date of HMS *Investigator*’s departure from Port Jackson, and conclude with 26<sup>th</sup> March 1803, the date of the *Investigator*’s arrival at Coepang Bay in Timor. The following extract exemplifies Flinders’s strategy of using dates as a structuring device in the process of reorganizing factual information recorded in logbook entries into a narrative report:

Leaving the Prince of Wales’ Islands on *November 3*, I steered into the Gulph of Carpentaria, keeping the eastern shore on board up to the head; and on the 17 anchored under island a [Sweers Island], the easternmost of a cluster in the south-west corner of the gulph, having, as yet, seen nothing of the north-west monsoon. On leaving this island, I attempted to prosecute the examination of the main land on the south side of the cluster, but finding it too shoal, returned to island a, and took in fresh water at its west point. (Morgan, *Australia* 341)

We notice here how Flinders uses dates in combination with geographical locations to chronicle the progress of the voyage by selecting and separating the key details of the report. In this way, the officer is

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<sup>16</sup> Okulska examined a corpus of official correspondence conducted for the purposes of diplomatic interaction of the Middle and Early Modern English periods, while Brownlees conducted a cross-linguistic investigation of two early eighteenth-century sets of diplomatic newsletters, one in English and one in Italian. On the distinctions between the public and private style of writing and differences between familiar, official and business correspondence in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, see Dossena, “‘Be Pleased’.”

able to condense and present the results of his hydrographical survey, providing precise information on when and how a specific part of the coast was surveyed. In Korte's definition of travel accounts, these texts, factual or fictional as they may be, "are defined by a narrative core: they always tell the story of a journey" (9). The narrative core of Flinders's letter is represented by the detailed description of the surveying which took place between 28<sup>th</sup> September 1802 and 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1802. During this period, Flinders was busy charting the outer route of the Great Barrier Reef, which resulted in one of his most significant navigational achievements: he was able to find a new route through Torres Strait. Relying on the macrostructure of an official letter report, Flinders is able to tell the story of this part of his voyage, presenting it as a coherent narrative. Written in a formal style, this narrative aims to present critical factual information in a letter seemingly devoid of any evaluation or personal opinion.

Two additional examples from this letter reveal Flinders's familiarity with the conventions of the epistolary genre and his ability to exploit the sociable, explicitly communicative dimensions of epistolary form (cf. Brant above) in order to negotiate his professional status and his power relationship – clearly asymmetrical – with the intended recipient(s) of the report. Noting the absence of "you" pronouns and other conventional ways of engaging with one's epistolary interlocutor (e.g., address terms in the main body of the letter),<sup>17</sup> we could draw the conclusion that Flinders's report lacks any interactive elements typically found in epistolary discourse. A closer scrutiny of the text, however, shows that Flinders chose to introduce less conventional interactive elements, as found in the following excerpt: "Upon the passage through Torres' Strait *I beg to make some remarks* [my emphasis]. The most expeditious passage that had hitherto been made through it, to the best of my knowledge, was by captain Bligh in nineteen days" (Morgan, *Australia* 340). The formulaic string "I beg to make some remarks" is employed here to achieve the specific communicative goal of signalling Flinders's awareness of his interlocutor(s). This choice is dictated by stylistic considerations: in fact, Flinders selects interactive elements that are appropriate in the communicative context of official correspondence. This example of the rhetorical request for permission to share his observations with his hierarchically superior interlocutor(s), for instance, also fulfils a negative politeness function by making explicit Flinders's concern with the threat his (unsolicited) additional commentary represents for the recipients' negative face, to borrow some of Brown and Levinson's terminology..

We may recall that the basis of Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness is represented by the notion of "face," which they define as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself"(quoted in Jucker 178).<sup>18</sup> "Negative face" and "positive face" constitute the two core and related aspects of "face," where the former stands for "the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction," and the latter for "the positive consistent self-image or 'personality'" (Brown and Levinson, quoted in Jucker 178-179). As Robert B. Arundale (277) observes, Brown and Levinson "make clear that participants are oriented not only to their own face wants, but in interaction are also mutually oriented to other participants' face wants." (277). In other words, Brown and Levinson's framework of politeness "is concerned with a competent and rational adult member of a society who pays attention both to his or her own face and to the face of his or her interlocutor" (Jucker 179). This competent and rational adult performs politeness by "putting things in such a way as to take account of the feelings of the hearer ...: those concerned with positive face and those with negative face" (Brown and Gilman 161). In the passage analysed, Flinders is clearly conscious of the fact that his decision to offer personal commentary to the factual summary of events may be interpreted as an intrusion "upon the free self-determination" (Brown and Gilman 161) of his (hierarchically superior) interlocutor, i.e., a threat to the interlocutor's negative face. Flinders thus employs a negative politeness strategy by inserting a polite

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<sup>17</sup> The possessive pronoun "your" is used only once: in the formulaic subscription "Your most obedient humble servant."

<sup>18</sup> The notion of "face" in Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness is derived from the writings of Erving Goffman, who defines the term "face" as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self-delineated in terms of approved social attributes" (quoted in Jucker 178).

request for permission to share this commentary,<sup>19</sup> In this way, he is able to manifest a high degree of sensitivity to hierarchical factors and “the social constraints and demands on ‘keeping up (polite) appearances’” (Nevala 96), inscribed in the conventions of epistolary exchanges between interlocutors of unequal social standing.

The second example, which points to Flinders’s ability as a letter writer, concerns the shifts in the use of the pronominal forms “I” and “we” in the main body of the report. The analysis of the ways in which these forms are employed shows that Flinders makes use of three distinct strategies, as is illustrated in the examples below:

- (a) Quitting the Northumberland Isles on October 4, we made a course to the north-eastward, and had scarcely lost sight of them before we fell in with extensive reefs of coral, being a continuation of those laid down in my chart of 1801. (Morgan, *Australia* 339)
- (b) With much regret at being obliged to leave the remainder of this interesting coast unexplored, I made all sail to the northward, on March 6, and passing between the Crocodile Isles, steered westward for Port Jackson: We touched at the New-Years Isle of McCluer, hoping to get turtle, but were disappointed. (Morgan, *Australia* 342)
- (c) On March 26 we were near 3° to the east, and but little to the south of Timor; I therefore thought it advisable to put in there for a few days to procure some species of provisions which were growing short, and refreshments for my ships company, the scurvy having begun to make its appearance amongst them; for the state of the ship made me fear that a call would be made upon them for severe exertion at the pumps, should we encounter any boisterous weather on the latter part of the passage to Port Jackson, as might reasonably be expected. (Morgan, *Australia* 342)

We can observe that in (a) the pronoun “we” is used to indicate the members of the crew on board HMS *Investigator*, its Commander included, as an unmarked collective referent. In (b) the first-person singular pronoun is substituted for the plural “we” in the second part of the passage. This replacement can be interpreted as a subtle way of emphasizing Flinders’s personal disappointment at not being able to continue the exploration of that particular stretch of the coast: the letter writer’s “distinct authorial presence” (cf. Smith above) and his subjective experience, that is, his emotional and mental state, are made explicit, only to quickly revert back to the more factual style of reporting in the same passage. Finally, (c) contains an example of the pronoun “I” being introduced to clearly signal Flinders’s responsibility for the decision to deviate from his original route and make a stop at Timor. In justifying this decision, Flinders provides a number of reasons, such as the shortage of provisions, the spread of scurvy among the crew, and the disastrous condition of the ship, all of which can be read as an attempt to draw attention to these external factors as a strategy of diminishing his own responsibility for this course of action. To achieve this goal, in the same passage Flinders also makes extensive use of hedging strategies (“I therefore thought it advisable” / “the state of the ship made me fear” / “as might reasonably be expected”).

## Concluding Remarks

Along with maps, journals and published travelogues, different kinds of letters were produced in the course of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century naval expeditions and voyages of discovery. According to Catherine Lanone, “official and practical [letters] made it possible to open channels of information back

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<sup>19</sup> Negative politeness here is defined as “any attempt to meet negative face wants”, i.e., “every person’s want to be free from imposition and distraction and to have her personal prerogatives and territory respected” (Brown and Gilman 161–163).



and forth, [while clipped messages exchanged between travellers] [became] the last thread of control over chaos” (49-50). With British ships sent out on voyages of exploration all over the globe, “creating, developing and maintaining an overseas empire; gaining and losing territory, exploring and fighting, carrying goods and people” (Edwards 2), official travel reports in epistolary form represented one of the key channels of information gathering for the British and colonial governments. As I have attempted to demonstrate in my analysis of a specimen of such reports, the presence of different rhetorical strategies in Flinders’s letter shows how, while adhering to precise instructions for scientific observation, he was able to exploit the conventions of the epistolary form in order to realize multiple communicative goals. On the one hand, official letters sent by captains to the Admiralty can be said to have been “part of a flow of information and opinions that interacted with and helped direct a flow of people, goods, and labour” (Brant 243). On the other hand, the same letters could express the subjectivity of the explorers’ experience by conveying something of their mental and emotional states, as well as provide space where explorers could negotiate their professional standing by commenting on and justifying their actions.

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