

Dario Manfredi

Alessandro Malaspina

A Biography



English Version by

Don S. Kirschner and Teresa J. Kirschner

Edited by Russell McNeil & John Black

To the late Antonio Orozco Acuaviva,
generous man,
valued Malaspinista,
irreplaceable friend.

Misfortunes always pursue men of genius

Miguel de Cervantes
Don Quixote

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TRANSLATORS' NOTE

We happened onto this project quite by accident when we were returning from a remarkable meeting between the present-day family members of the Italo-Spanish mariner Alessandro Malaspina and Chief Maquinna of the Mowachaht/Muchalaht First Nations who greeted Alessandro on the West Coast of Vancouver Island more than two hundred years ago. The conversation turned casually to the desirability of translating a biography of Malaspina from Spanish into English, and suddenly we were doing it.

As translators we encountered many problems, but we want to mention two in particular that were specific to our subject. The first was what to call Malaspina. Consider that the Italian navigator Cristoforo Colombo sailed for the Spanish crown as Cristóbal Colón, and is known in the English-speaking world as Christopher Columbus. That was the choice we had with Malaspina. He was born in Italy as Alessandro, sailed for Spain on his great voyage as Alexandro, and has a name that translates into English as Alexander (Alejandro in modern Spanish). We settled on Alessandro, which is how he was born and how he died.

The second problem was more difficult. Malaspina was an Italian who often wrote in Spanish, French and Latin, languages he did not handle well at all. Moreover, many of his original writings have been lost, leaving us with 19th Century Spanish transcriptions of uncertain accuracy both of content and style. And after all excuses are made for him, Malaspina himself was a terrible writer in any language, including Italian. Some of his labyrinthine sentences were almost two hundred words long, and virtually impenetrable; some had pronouns that could have referred to any one of three or four nouns. In making what sense we could of all this, our aim was to simplify the style while remaining faithful to his meaning.

If we have helped make Alessandro comprehensible, we hope you will join in our growing admiration for this valiant and honourable, if foolhardy, Enlightenment man.

Along the way we have incurred several obligations. We want to thank John Kendrick for helping us translate certain nautical terms; Robin Inglis for assisting us on countless occasions; John Black and Russell McNeil of Malaspina University College, and Doris and Alex Malaspina for supporting the project from the outset. Finally, we want to thank Dario Manfredi, the author of this book, who helped us constantly and with good humour by FAX from Italy.

Teresa J. Kirschner
Don S. Kirschner

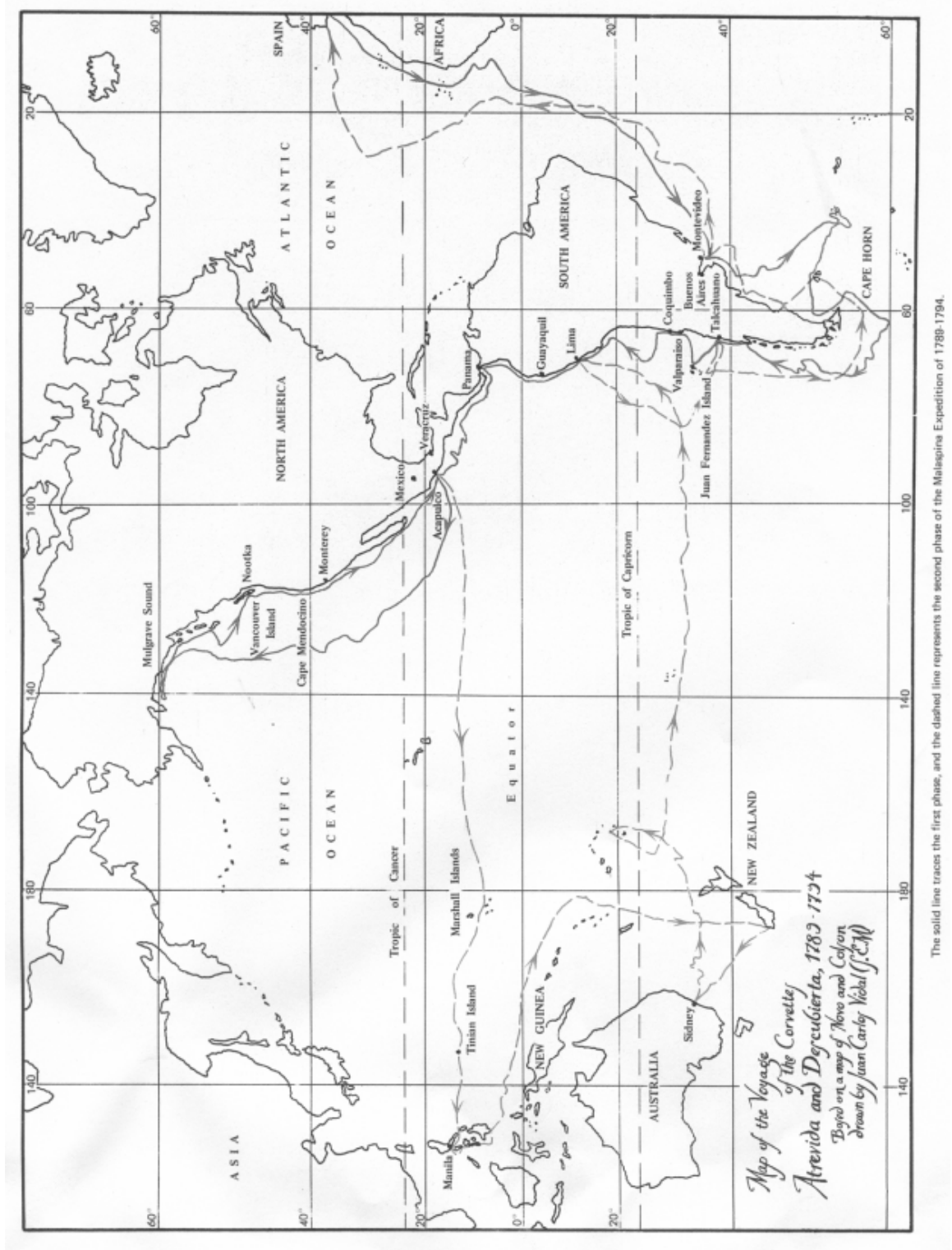


Figure 1. Map of the voyage of the corvettes *Atrevida* and *Descubierta*, 1789-1794.

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Figure 2. An engraving and description of an armillary sphere sent by José Mendoza y Ríos (1763-1806) from London. A devotee of modern scientific trends, Mendoza published important treatises on navigation and cartography. As a prominent astronomer in London, he acted on behalf of Spanish centres of investigation as a source of scientific instruments and geographical descriptions.

Editor's Preface

Several years ago Dario Manfredi greeted me at the Pontremoli rail station waving a small Canadian flag. Pontremoli is the burial place of the Enlightenment navigator Alessandro Malaspina. Within 20 minutes of this first meeting Dr. Manfredi had whisked us to the entrance of the Centro di Studi Malaspiniani in Mulazzo, a facility lovingly maintained by Manfredi. Near the entrance is a life size statue of Dante (see Figure 24) only metres away from the ancestral medieval castle of one branch of the Malaspina family, situated in a breathtaking setting high above the surrounding northern Tuscany countryside. Alessandro Malaspina was born in this timeless place on November 5, 1754. My visit here and to the Centro di Studi Malaspiniani, where Dario is Director, had come about from a suggestion by Malaspina University College writer and web editor John Lund.

This present volume emerged from this fortunate meeting. Teresa and Don Kirschner's inspired translation of Dario Manfredi's Spanish-language biography of Alessandro Malaspina would not have been possible without the encouragement and generous support of Alex and Doris Malaspina.

Among others who contributed to this project I offer special thanks to Robin Inglis, who guided me throughout. John Black was responsible for the final editing, in which process he also converted the English spelling to that of the United Kingdom. Others who provided invaluable support include Ana Maria Donat, Bill Weller and David Thomas. I also extend my appreciation to Sharon Bremner who helped keep me focused and on track during the final stages of this project.

The statue of Dante near the ancestral Malaspina Castle contains an inscription, penned in the *Purgatorio* as a tribute to the Malaspina family who had protected and sheltered Dante during his exile (from *Purgatorio* Canto VIII, translated by Charles Eliot Norton).

"...I was called Corrado Malaspina; I am not the ancient, but from him I am descended; to mine own I bore the love which here is refined." "Oh," said I to him, "through your lands I have never been, but where doth man dwell in all Europe that they are not renowned? The fame that honoreth your house proclaims its lords, proclaims its district, so that he knows of them who never yet was there; and I swear to you, so may I go above, that your honored race doth not despoil itself of the praise of the purse and of the sword. Custom and nature so privilege it that though the guilty head turn the world awry, alone it goes right and scorns the evil road..."

Russell McNeil, *Alexandro Malaspina Research Centre*
January 16, 2003

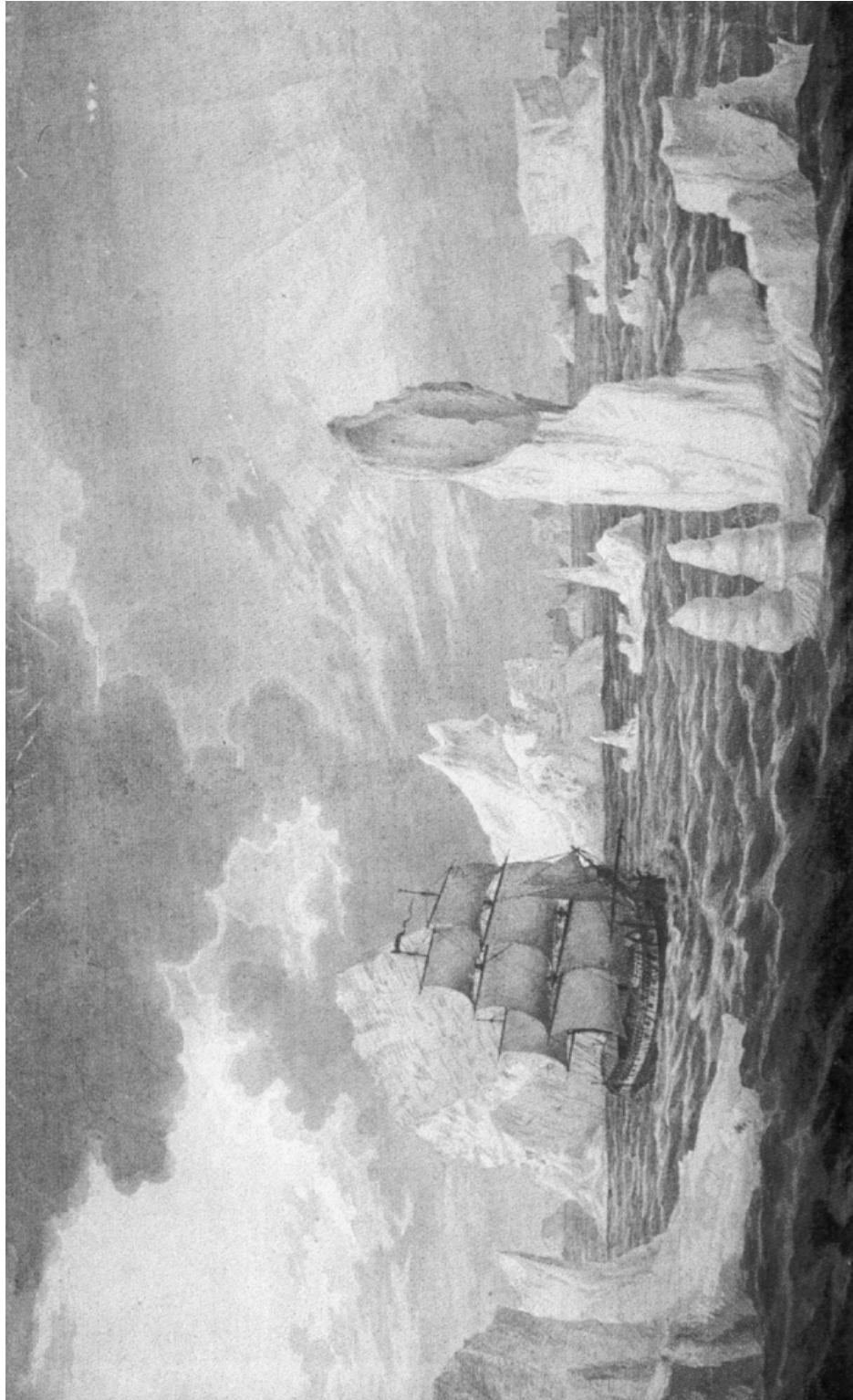


Figure 3. The corvette *Atrevida* surrounded by icebergs on January 28, 1794. Cape Horn. Fernando Brambilla, Museo Naval.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The present book is the revised and updated translation into English of my essay, “*Alejandro Malaspina: Una biografía*,” which is included in the volume, *Alejandro Malaspina. La América imposible*, edited by Blanca Sáiz. Obviously I must repeat some of the acknowledgments – already expressed in the foreword of the Spanish edition – of the many scholars and friends who have assisted me in my research for many years. Unfortunately, some of them have since passed away, but I remember these with the others, because in my heart they remain alive.

Therefore, thanks to: Father Francesco Azzopardi, Peter Barber, Eric Beerman, Father Dino Bravieri, José María Cano Trigo, Bruno Colombi, Donald C. Cutter, Laurio Destéfani, Eduardo Estrella, Andrés Galera, Don Nilo Greco, Frederic V. Grunfeld, Lola Higuera, Claudio Jaccarino, Felipe Senén López Gómez, Commendator Mario Mengoli, Monsignor Marco Mori, Mercedes Palau, Catherine Poupney-Hart, Canon Angelo Ricci, Blanca Sáiz, Father Marco Tentorio, Father Osvaldo Tosti, Arancha Zabala.

To these I must add the names of those who have helped me more recently: Senatore Paolo Emilio Taviani, Marco Angella, Loris J. Bononi, Belén Fernández, Raffaele Giura Longo, José Ignacio González-Haller, Francesca Guastalli, Oldrich Kaspar, Robert J. King, Giovanni Liva, Antonio Orozco, Bernardino Osio, Jorge Ortiz Sotelo, and Emilio Soler.

Special mention is reserved for the late Mrs. Aurora Mengoli, who has given the valuable historical archive of the Mulazzo Malaspinas to the Centro Alessandro Malaspina. Mrs. Mengoli passed away while revisions to this volume were being completed.

Among those who helped me most, Robin Inglis, in particular, stands out for the many useful suggestions he made, especially about the Northwest Coast phase of the expedition.

This list may seem too extensive, but without the help of many friends in different countries it would have been impossible for me to write a comprehensive biography of our Alessandro.

To these I must still add the names of those who have facilitated the edition of the present volume: Doris and Alex Malaspina, John Black and Russell McNeil.

I owe special thanks to Teresa and Don Kirschner, who have contributed more than a simple translation (although a translation is never simple). These friends have had to struggle repeatedly with my compulsion for adding notes and comments to the original text, written, moreover, in my abominable Spanish.

d. m.



Figure 4. Portrait of *Alessandro Malaspina* in his last years. Drawing executed by his friend Antonio Ricci.
Archive of the *Centro di Studi Alessandro Malaspina* in Mulazzo.

IN LIEU OF A PROLOGUE

The morning of September 20, 1790: aboard the corvette *Descubierta* of His Catholic Majesty, the gentleman Alessandro Malaspina, captain of the Royal Navy, is locked in his cabin where he is writing a letter to his brother Azzo Giacinto, feudal lord of the miniscule marquisate of Mulazzo in Lunigiana in distant Italy.

Before noon the small vessel, which had left Spain with its twin *Atrevida* more than a year earlier, will weigh anchor in the harbour of Callao after a four-month stop-over in Peru, and sail toward New Spain (Mexico). Afterward, they will head toward the little known northwest coasts of America, and then proceed in the direction of Asia and Oceania. There they will visit – and observe with the eyes of *philosophes* – the Philippines, parts of southern New Zealand, eastern Australia and the Vava'u archipelago (Tonga).

Malaspina spends some time describing the tasks to come. Among other things, he writes:

... natural history can advance rapidly because all of us occupy ourselves not only in studying the varieties of land products, and in particular of the woods for construction that grow here abundantly, but also in learning about the snakes, fish and water fowl that flourish in amazing variety in the charming river banks nearby.

On January 15, 1769, Captain James Cook had written in the journal of his ship *Endeavour*, while sailing near Tierra del Fuego:

However, I sent a boat ashore with an officer to attend to Mr. Banks ... who was very desirous of being ashore at any rate. ... At nine [the people] returned on board bringing with them several plants, flowers, etc. most of them unknown in Europe and in that alone consisted their whole value.

Scarcely more than twenty years separated these two texts, but how distant from each other were the cultural horizons of the two mariners! On Cook's expedition, scientists were barely tolerated; on Malaspina's the seamen were in the service of science. Cook and Malaspina were the two giants of 18th-century maritime exploration, but the contrast in their intellectual and cultural approach was enormous. The different concepts they had of the relationship between geographic exploration and the advancement of scientific knowledge in general become apparent as soon as their respective journals are compared, and that in spite of the fact that Malaspina himself considered Cook to be his teacher.

Indeed, the Englishman was as much a "pure" navigator as the Italian was a traveller-*philosophe*. The Englishman was conscious of being an essential instrument in the building of the British Empire; the Italian was cognizant of fulfilling a service to knowledge, useful not only to his adoptive country of Spain, but to the whole of humanity without distinction.

As far as cultural matters are concerned, in all probability, Malaspina was inferior only to Jean-François de Galaup, Comte de La Pérouse, who was born and raised in that large foundry of ideas that was Enlightenment France. In nautical expertise, however, he undoubtedly surpassed the Frenchman. The proof of that was the shipwreck that killed La Pérouse and his travel companions, a tribute to the infamous coasts of the New Hebrides.

In any case, the major Malaspina enterprise – that is, his political-scientific expedition – clearly outshines that undertaken by the aristocratic, and even snobbish, erudition of a Bougainville or by the aseptic explorative methodology of a Vancouver. If those are the values that prevailed in the maritime history of the 18th century, the extraordinary popularity enjoyed by the aforementioned French and British seamen is unjustified alongside the continuing near-obscure of Malaspina.

Of course, this fact is easily explained in purely historical terms. Malaspina fell in disgrace just when he was preparing to publish the geographic, astronomical and naturalist findings gathered by his team; as a consequence his papers were impounded; of his papers, only the astronomical and cartographic results were published, posthumously and all but anonymously; the British and the Spanish undertook subsequent expeditions. All of these elements conspired to obscure Malaspina's contribution to geographic and scientific knowledge. It could not have been otherwise. Furthermore, in later decades the political and economic misfortunes of Spain, perhaps accompanied by a certain amount of guilt, prevented this historical injustice from being corrected.

Dario Manfredi