

Louis Le Breton's New Zealand

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In common with earlier voyages of discovery despatched by the French Government to the Pacific, that of the *Astrolabe* and the *Zélée* which sailed from France in September 1837 under the command of Dumont D'Urville counted among its scholars and scientists an official artist, Ernest-Auguste Goupil. The expedition's commander spoke well of his work in a report published in France in November 1838, but Goupil died in Tasmania at the beginning of 1840 and the latter part of the voyage—the second descent to the Antarctic, the Auckland Islands, New Zealand and the return to France—was recorded by Louis Le Breton alone.¹

Louis-Auguste-Marie Le Breton was born at Douarnenez, Brittany, on 15 January 1818, the son, grandson and (probably) nephew of doctors.² He received his secondary education at Quimper, and entered the Naval Medical School at Brest on 1 March 1836. His appointment as surgeon on the *Astrolabe* (23 July 1837) followed almost immediately on his graduation (8 June 1837) with the rank of 'chirurgien entretenu de la marine de 3^e classe', and on 7 September the voyage began. Although no reliable evidence has yet been unearthed to clarify the nature of his artistic training, we may assume that he received some elements in Quimper and made still further progress during his months at Brest, since draughtsmanship was a basic skill for an officer in the nineteenth century French navy. The recognition his gifts received during the expedition from none less than Dumont D'Urville³ must have contributed to the decision taken shortly after the return to France to become a professional artist. Partly to this end, he initiated a series of letters and ministerial minutes culminating in the release of his most successful drawings for exhibition in the 1841 Paris Salon. His work was to appear in these, the most important art exhibitions in nineteenth century France, on two further occasions during the 1840s, but the critics appear to have maintained a unanimous silence concerning his watercolours and oil paintings, and this potential career drew to a discreet close about the end of the decade.

Meanwhile, in April 1841 he had been seconded to the editorial team preparing the official account of the voyage for publication, his specific responsibility being the preparation and the supervision of the lithographic plates by which his own work is best known. There is no evidence to suggest that at this time he himself drew any