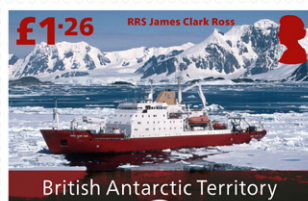


Changing of the guard

by Marek Błus

Over the past few years, Australia, France, and the United Kingdom replaced the ships serving their antarctic scientific stations. The newcomers are, obviously, more modern, better, bigger, and stronger. The construction thereof also presented national celebration opportunities, especially in Australia and the UK (the same happened with their predecessors). What counted the most for us, collectors, were the numerous 'philatelic occasions' associated with welcoming the newbuilds as well as bidding the oldies farewell. Excluding issues outside the three countries and their dependencies, we got 16 stamps to rejoice in!



Traditionally, all Antarctic topics are reserved for the "independent" philatelic offices assigned to the administrations of the 'white southernmost desserts' claimed by the mentioned powers. And indeed, ships seem to be the most attractive topic here. The British Antarctic Territory (BAT) is especially keen on issuing polar shipping stamps (over 60), which depict all modern vessels (naval & civilian) involved in research and station supply. RRS *James Clark Ross* holds the record collection title with 15 philatelic portraits, of which BAT issued 14 and Tristan da Cunha – one (we omit another piece authorised by Togo's La Poste).

James Clark Ross climbed the ranks during her 30 years of service (1991-2021). That said, her heir, the brand new RRS *Sir David Attenborough*, is making a second trip to Antarctica, already having nine stamps! BAT released eight of these, while the ninth came from the Falkland Islands (with Stanley, the Islands' capital, being the ship's homeport; on a side note, two other stamps originated on African soil). We expect *Attenborough* to claim *Ross*' title in just a few years.

Both British vessels have welcome series that were issued during the construction process (but in the case of the older unit, only two stamps depict the ship). The farewell series, *The Final Voyage of the RRS James Clark Ross*, is a novelty. Then again, it wasn't 'goodbye forever' – the vessel was sold to Ukraine in 2021. Renamed *Noosfera*, she continues her transport & scientific duties in Antarctic waters. The ship serves the Ukrainian Vernadsky Research Base and the Polish Arctowski Antarctic Station. It would be more than wonderful to see a Ukrainian stamp in the near future (better still, stamps!).

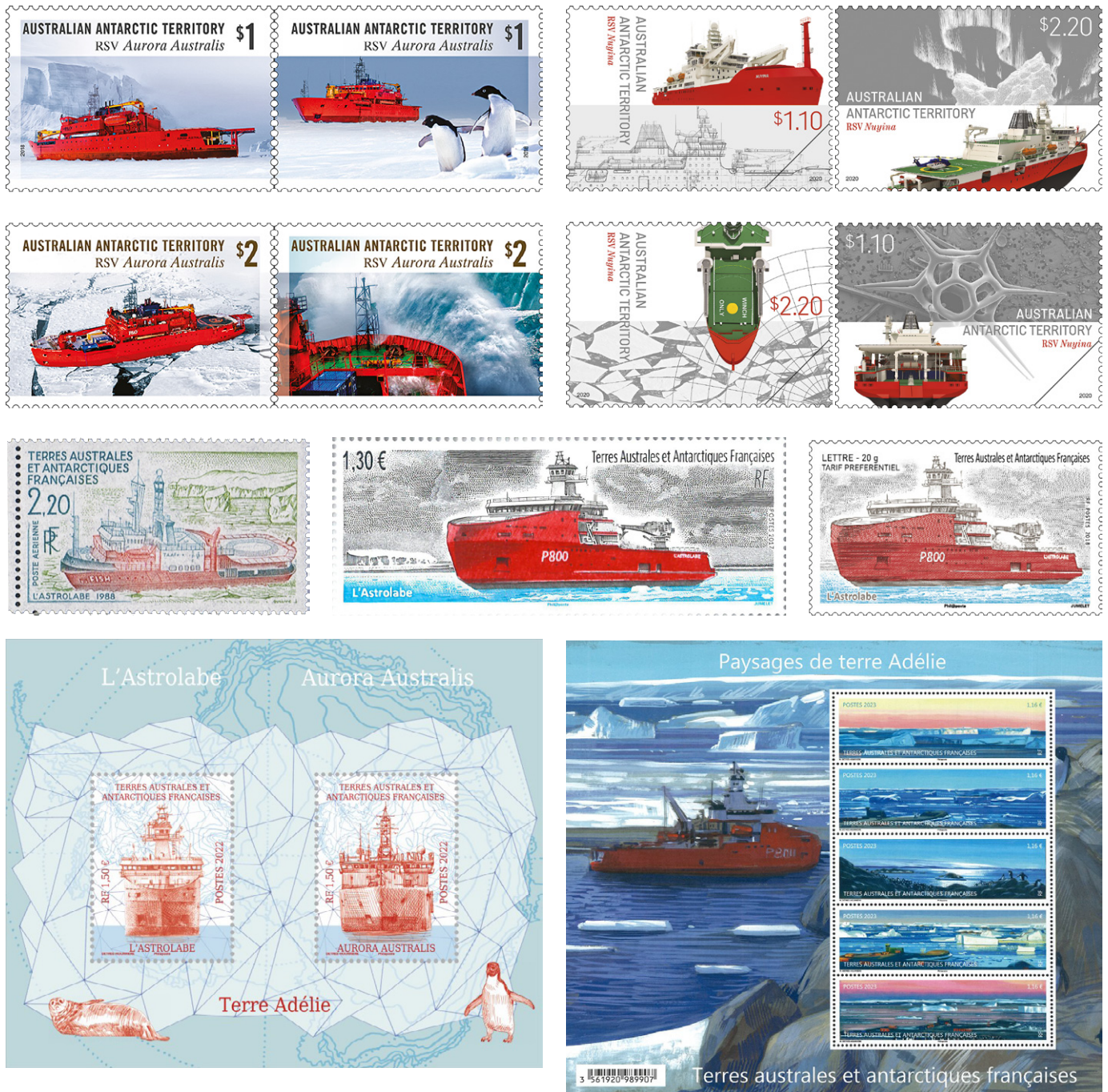
The Australian polar investment RSV *Nuyiana* (pronounced noy-ee-nah, meaning "Southern Lights" in palawa kani, the language of Tasmanian Aborigines) surpasses the British one in many aspects, particularly in size & power. However, she doesn't measure up to *Attenborough* in the number of stamps authorised by the Australian Antarctic Territory (AAT). *Nuyiana* is almost one and a half times bigger than *Attenborough* (gross tonnage of 22,826 vs GT 15,906),



but she has only four stamps in one series. Each is separately titled, although the names are not visible in the faces: 'Design,' 'Aurora Australis,' 'Icebreaker,' and 'Science Platform.'

RSV *Aurora Australis* (Latin for Southern Dawn) was the first Australian tailor-designed icebreaking research & supply vessel. She was built almost simultaneously with *James Clark Ross*, entering into service one year ahead of *Ross* in 1990. Even though the old Australian vessel surpasses its British contemporary in size (GT 6,543 vs GT 5,732), it only lived to see six AAT philatelic portraits: two in the welcome and four in the farewell series. The last one was issued in 2018, officially for the ship's 30th anniversary (laid up in 1988). The whole edition also includes a mini-sheet that repeats all four farewell stamps.

Contrary to *Ross*, *Aurora* didn't find a buyer from the world of science and went to the United Arab Emirates (under the Cypriot flag of convenience). It seemed like the 2018 edition would turn *Aurora's* philatelic light off, yet unexpectedly she made a comeback in a block



issued in 2022 by... the French Southern and Antarctic Territories (TAAF)! RSV *Aurora Australis* accompanies the new French polar patrol ship *L'Astrolabe* – both are depicted on separate stamps. Probably this gesture is a token of gratitude as *Aurora* helped the French polar bases when *L'Astrolabe* suffered a severe mechanical failure in 2019.

Before moving from the Anglo-Saxon culture to the Francophone one, let us remember that British and Australian polar ships are national icons. Their names were chosen following national competitions. Moreover, VIPs christened them, just like the big passenger liners or battleships in the past (e.g., Queen Elizabeth II was *James Clark Ross*' godmother).

The French have a different attitude to the naming tradition – they consequently use *L'Astrolabe* after the sailing ships of two renowned French explorers and navigators: Jean-François de Galaup, comte de Lapérouse (1741-1788) and Jules Dumont d'Urville (1790-1842). The last polar *L'Astrolabe* was a small, secondhand converted vessel

(GT 1,753; ex-Canadian platform supply vessel), maybe not worthy of too many stamps. The new one, built in 2017 and belonging to the French Navy (so she bears a pennant number P800), isn't all that much bigger (GT 2,028), nor is she as richly equipped as her Commonwealth companions, but she's still an attractive subject for stamps. Her portrait from the 'welcoming' stamp, issued in 2017 (face value €1.30), was before long repeated on a shorter stamp without an iceberg in the background. The collection was then supplemented by the view of the bow in the mentioned TAAF block, and in 2023, she appeared in a painted body of the mini-sheet with stamps depicting Antarctic landscapes of Adélie Land. On top of that, two African countries added two stamps to her portfolio.

Because all the presented new vessels are classified as icebreakers, we wish them thicker than ice hulls – and even thicker stamp portfolios! ■