

# Jules Sébastien César Dumont d'Urville (1790 – 1842)

Jules Sébastien César Dumont d'Urville (Dumont d'Urville is the surname) was born in the village of Condé sur Noireau in Normandy, France, on 23 May 1790, the eighth child of Gabriel Charles François Dumont, a judge and affluent landowner, and his wife Jeanne Françoise de Croisilles, from one of the oldest families of the French nobility. They were forced to leave their estates in 1789, at the onset of the French Revolution, and in 1793 settled at Caen on the River Orne, where Gabriel died two years later. A delicate child and by then the only surviving son, Jules had little early formal education. From 1798 he was tutored by his uncle, Father Jean Jacques François de Croisilles; he developed a love of nature and an appetite for learning, and did very well at the two colleges he later attended.



## ***Durvillaea antarctica***

The Southern Hemisphere seaweed genus *Durvillaea* contains five species, four of them in New Zealand. Rimurapa, the giant golden-brown bull kelp, *Durvillaea antarctica*, forms a mass of writhing thongs at low water along very exposed rocky shores, sometimes (as here) with and above the zone of *Durvillaea willana*. A large, tough holdfast fixes it tightly to the rock. From this grows a rounded stalk that expands into a wide, heavy blade, which in turn breaks up to form whip-like thongs. The blade and thongs have internal honeycomb-like tissue with air spaces that give buoyancy, a characteristic used by Māori who slit through it to make waterproof rubbery bags in which to preserve titi (muttonbirds).

In 1807 Dumont d'Urville entered the French navy with the temporary rank of midshipman and in 1812 was promoted to ensign. On 1 May 1815 at Toulon he married Adèle Dorothée Pepin, the daughter of a watchmaker; at least four children were born of the marriage, but none survived to adulthood. In his spare time he studied languages and the sciences, especially botany, and in 1822 he published a book based on the plants he collected on a nine-month Mediterranean voyage. He was also instrumental in acquiring for France the now famous Venus de Milo statue. By then he was a member of the Linnean Society and had been made Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur.

In 1822, as second-in-command to his friend Duperrey, he sailed on the *Coquille* for southern waters on a voyage lasting 2½ years, with nearly four weeks spent at the Bay of Islands, New Zealand. Dumont d'Urville botanised and vowed to return. His opportunity came in 1826 when he commanded the same ship, renamed *Astrolabe*, for further exploration and scientific research. During the 67 days in New Zealand waters, detailed coastal surveys were made, and a large number of plants collected. The published account of the expedition included a two-volume botanical section, the first of which was devoted to the flora of New Zealand. In it many species were described for the first time.

A third expedition, with *Astrolabe* and *Zélée*, explored the Antarctic coast during two summer seasons and arrived in New Zealand in 1840. At Akaroa Dumont d'Urville was disappointed to learn that the British had claimed New Zealand, for he knew that French settlers were on their way to the new land. He met newly appointed Governor Hobson at the Bay of Islands and then sailed for France, but did not live to see the completion of his account of the voyage – he, his wife and surviving son died on 4 May 1842 in a train accident on the Paris-Versailles line.

Dumont d'Urville was acknowledged as one of France's foremost authorities in geographical discovery, and is commemorated in botany by the seaweed genus *Durvillaea* and species *Grateloupia urvilleana*, and the species names of several New Zealand flowering plants. A coastal five-finger that he found near Whangarei was named *Pseudopanax lessonii* after Adolph Lesson, the naturalist on his second voyage. Many geographical place names are also evocative of the French connection in the early history of New Zealand.