

Antoine-Joseph Pernety (1716 – 1796)

Antoine-Joseph Pernety (or Pernetty), also known as Dom Pernety – a title sometimes prefixed to names of Roman Catholic dignitaries and Benedictine monks – was born in Roanne in the Loire, central France, on 13 February 1716. He became a Benedictine monk of the congregation of Saint Maur at a young age, and took his vows at the Abbey of Saint-Alliré Clermont when he was sixteen. Applying himself to his studies, his first publication, a translation of a German book on mathematics, appeared in 1743, and was followed shortly after by some religious treatises. In 1746 he transferred to the Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés where there were more resources for learning, and undertook diverse research. Becoming interested in natural history, he observed and drew plants in the vicinity. At that time much of the land on the flood-prone Left Bank of Paris could not be built on, and the abbey stood in the middle of fields, *prés* in French, hence its name.

Dom Pernety's participation in social intercourse at Madame du Deffand's fashionable literary and philosophical salon undoubtedly influenced his appointment as chaplain and naturalist on Bougainville's expedition to establish a small settlement on the Falkland Islands. The frigate *Aigle* left St Malo on 9 September 1763, and in February 1764 a ceremony for formal possession was made, with Pernety performing High Mass at a specially constructed altar. He was described as a pleasant companion and a keen observer and commentator, and his two-volume account of the expedition, which was first published in Berlin in 1769, was the

first monograph of the Falkland Islands. However, although he spent three months (2 February until 8 April 1764) in scientifically unexplored territory, his contribution to natural history was little more than a chapter of meagre notes and inaccurate drawings of a few of the more obvious animals and plants.

At the age of 50 Pernety left the Benedictine Order and settled at Avignon where he resumed his early interests in alchemy and mysticism, and in 1769, at the invitation of Frederick the Great, he became curator of the Berlin library and a member of the Royal Academy of Sciences. Living the life of an academic for ten years in the entourage of the court, he published numerous works, some of them logical and useful, and others beyond the bounds of reason. He translated and was influenced by the Christian mysticism of Swedenborg, and in 1778 joined a small group of esotericists, the Illuminati of Avignon. When he left Berlin in 1782 he returned to Avignon and then lived with his brother at Valence until his death at the age of 80, on 16 October 1796.

In 1825 Charles Gaudichaud-Beaupre (1789–1854), botanist on the 1817–1820 expedition of Louis de Freycinet and author of *Flora of the Malouine Islands*, gave the name *Pernettya* to a new genus in the Ericaceae (heath) family, in recognition of the Benedictine monk's account of the Falkland Islands, where it occurs. *Pernettya alpina* (now *Gaultheria nubicola*) is one of three New Zealand species that have been included in the genus.



Gaultheria nubicola

Differing mainly in the berried fruit and upright flowers, *Pernettya* is now subsumed into *Gaultheria*, a large and widespread genus of snowberries native to Asia, the Americas and Australasia, but continues to be recognised by some authors. *Pernettya alpina*, originally named in 1962, was renamed *Gaultheria nubicola* (Latin *nubes* 'clouds'; *cola* 'dweller') in 1990. It is a creeping shrub forming mats of hard, shiny leaves, bronze to dull green, the veins evident and margins red, with a few minute teeth. Relatively large single bell-like flowers at or near the branch tips are white except for their pink lobes. The small fruit remain green and inconspicuous until late autumn. The species is fairly widespread in the higher mountains of the South Island.