

**Anselme Ricard, *Lettres d'Australie* edited by Peter Hambly (Ancora Press, 2010)**

If you like reading original historical accounts about what it was like to live in the second half of the nineteenth century in the Australian colonies from a Frenchman's perspective, then you will be thoroughly rewarded by this short collection of letters written in French by Anselme Ricard for the Parisian daily paper *La Presse*, and carefully edited by French scholar Peter Hambly.

Anselme Ricard arrived in Australia in 1853, aged 29, and his correspondence for the Parisian daily newspaper extends to 1856. Originally trained in literary studies, he is better remembered in Australia for his brief teaching career as one of the first Readers appointed at the newly established University of Sydney in the French language programme (1853-1855).<sup>1</sup> Due to the uncertainty of a long-term position there, he resigned and returned to France in 1856 to pursue his literary interests, and resumed a writing career in Prague, New York, and Philadelphia where he eventually died in 1922. This propensity to move across continents suggests an adventurous spirit that propelled Ricard to explore horizons beyond his native provincial town of Roquemaure in Southern France. The interest of his *Lettres d'Australie* thus resides in offering the French reader an outsider's perspective, as when one is writing from beyond one's borders. Hence the title of the series *Xenographia: Writers and readers from Elsewhere* chosen by the publishers of this series at Monash University.

It seems that throughout these letters, which incidentally took three months to reach France – we are told that 64 days was then a record time to cover the distance between the two countries by steamer – Anselme Ricard was most impressed by the success of the English to transform this vast land into a prosperous colonial outpost for the British settlers and other emigrants. This can be gathered from the comment he makes about the 'laziness' of the Spanish conquerors to make anything of their newly acquired territory in South America (31), and from the regret he expresses about the slow establishment of New Caledonia as a French colony by comparison. According to him, the French could have followed the example of the enterprising English who provided all kinds of administrative incentives to settle and develop the land there.

Besides the industrious nature of the British settlers, the gold rush in Victoria clearly made an impression on Ricard as it played a pivotal role in attracting a variety of other migrants, mostly unskilled labourers from Europe and China, who were given a chance to 'have a go', whether they struck it lucky or simply settled and worked on the land. To prove this point, Ricard gives abundant details of the economic prosperity that fuelled the emerging rivalry between the two burgeoning metropolises of Melbourne and Sydney (63). We are informed, for instance, that importations of manufactured goods were at times glutting the Australian market and the fluctuations of exports (mainly gold, cattle, wool and grease) threatened the economic equilibrium of the developing nation. And then, as his prose becomes a little overburdened with figures, Ricard enlivens his listings of commercial transactions with reports on a number of criminal incidents that peppered the life of the settlers, or anecdotes such as how Tasmania got its name.

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Kerr, 'Four Early French Teachers at the University of Sydney', in *Journal of the Sydney University* (2012) 39. Web. ojs-prod.library.usyd.edu.au

Ricard's letters are nonetheless revealing of the settlers' everyday social customs. We learn precisely the quantity of drapes, jewellery, perfumes, furniture, shoes, tea, wine, that were imported; the quantity of liquors and other consumables ingested per head of population (e.g. 25 litres of spirit per year [15]); the wages of each corporation, labourers and servants (27-28). These meticulously itemised 'facts' may have been prompted by a desire to adopt the journalistic imperative of reporting exact information, 'J'obéis à mon devoir de correspondant exact'<sup>2</sup> (52), however, the lack of consistency in the currency used for reporting these, which are sometimes given in pound sterling and other times in French francs, makes it difficult for the reader to gain an objective view, and we must rely on Ricard's assessment that, for instance, the amount of money which was allocated per year for migrants from the British Isles was very generous.

Ricard also fails to maintain the required impartiality of journalism, and his critical stance may be skewed as his reflections are simply representing the opinions of his contemporaries and ideology of the colonial era. In fact, Ricard makes an apology for colonialism, where the natives are simply brushed aside and deemed unintelligent:

... ce sol foulé il y a soixante ans, par la race stupide des aborigènes, est aujourd'hui la propriété d'une race civilisée, conquérante, avide de butin et de bien-être, qui marche hardiment de front vers la plus belle conquête que l'histoire mentionne, la conquête pacifique des Océans par son industrie et son activité.<sup>3</sup> (18).

This would appear unenlightened and offensively ethnocentric today, although, to his credit, he does not go as far as condoning violent and unfair treatment of the natives: 'On a assez abusé de ces naturels, il est temps de venger l'humanité'<sup>4</sup> (36).

On the subject of artistic and literary pursuits in the colonies, Ricard deplores the fact that the theatre in particular, a sign of a great civilised society according to him, is not well supported or encouraged. Once again readers are given an accumulation of factual information (48) and also, at times, contradicting statements. On page 41, for example, he writes the theatre is expensive, but later he claims that only the popular classes are interested in the theatre, which does not encourage the pursuit of high standards (64-65)! According to him, charity balls and showing off one's attire provide sufficient entertainment for the well-to-do settlers. The laborious classes drink too much and get into strife. This reader suspects that a more nuanced approach might give more credibility to these accounts.

With regard to the bi-lateral relations between France and the Australian colonies, which runs as a thematic thread throughout these letters, the author sees them based on an *entente cordiale*, as demonstrated by charity balls organised in support of the French soldiers engaged in the Crimean war, for instance. Ricard also insists on the advantages that the English could gain from drawing on a greater number of migrants. The French could bring their technical savoir-faire in extracting the minerals, in agriculture, the care of vineyards, and the processing of olive oil. He therefore urges French readers to consider migrating to Australia and take advantage of these opportunities (48), although in his first letter in which

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<sup>2</sup> 'I dutifully fulfill my task as exact correspondent'. (This and the following translations are mine).

<sup>3</sup> '...this land, trodden upon sixty years ago by the stupid race of Aborigines, is today owned by a civilised, conquering race, eager to enjoy the spoils and the comfort, as it bravely heads on the most beautiful conquest mentioned in history, the peaceful conquest of the Oceans through its industrious activity'.

<sup>4</sup> 'One has sufficiently taken advantage of these natives, now it is time to avenge humanity'.

he shows his attachment to France he does not see it as such a good idea: ‘Toutefois, je ne conseillerais pas aux cultivateurs français de venir en Australie ... quand nous avons la France où il y a tant à faire’<sup>5</sup> (6). He however deplores that due to this *entente cordiale* not more is done to encourage French settlers who reside in Australia to expand in New Caledonia which is situated only a short distance away from Sydney.

This edition by Peter Hambly is well presented with complementary annotations that bring up to date information on the historical significance of these figures named by Ricard, both on the French and the Australian sides. It would have been helpful to have a closing remarks section perhaps on the significance of these letters, as the collection seems to end abruptly. One is left wondering how these letters influenced the French at the time? Was there any follow-up? However, it is enjoyable to read, with critical hindsight, these fascinating observations, as they offer a record of life in the Australian colonies from June 1853 to January 1856 while reflecting the impressions of an educated Frenchman who witnessed it all from his perspective as an outsider.

**Colette Mrowa-Hopkins**

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<sup>5</sup> ‘However, I would not advise our French growers to come to Australia ... when we have France where there is so much to do’.