

LA TROBE, Charles Joseph (1801–1875)

Charles Joseph La Trobe was born on 20 March 1801 in London, the fifth child and third son of Christian Ignatius La Trobe, and his wife Hannah, both of Huguenot descent. He was to become Superintendent of the Port Phillip District of New South Wales in 1839 and, with the separation of the District as the new Colony of Victoria in 1851, he was appointed Lieutenant-Governor, a position he held until his departure in 1854.

The English La Trobe family are descended from Jean Latrobe, 'the Emigrant', who was born in 1670 in Villemur-sur-Tarn, a village near Montauban in the south of France. He joined the forces of Prince William of Orange at the time of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, and accompanied him to England where the Prince took the English throne in 1688. After fighting in the Battle of the Boyne in 1690, Jean Latrobe settled in Ireland and became involved in the newly established linen industry.

A preliminary point must be made about the family name: La Trobe/Latrobe.

The name has been spelled 'Latrobe' in France from as early as the fourteenth-century, and this is the form also used by the American branch of the family. Some Anglo-Saxon branches adopted the form 'La Trobe', while the Baltic line is known as 'de La Trobe' following the knighthood bestowed on John Frederic by Czar Alexander II in 1864. I have followed this orthographic practice. Charles Joseph La Trobe's family generally used the version 'La Trobe', although Charles Joseph himself used 'La Trobe' and 'Latrobe' interchangeably.

Jean was the father of three sons, the second of whom, James, was the great-grandfather of Charles Joseph La Trobe. James La Trobe, a linen manufacturer and merchant like his father, was brought up in his birthplace of Waterford as a Baptist. He was received into the Moravian congregation in Dublin in 1750, thus beginning a strongly enduring and deep commitment to that faith continued by so many of his descendants.

Christian Ignatius La Trobe, grandson of James and great-grandson of Jean, became a bishop and evangelical missionary in the Moravian church, and was a staunch supporter of William Wilberforce in the anti-slavery movement. He was a talented musician and composer, and a close friend of Franz Josef Haydn.



1851 portrait of Charles Joseph La Trobe by W. A. Hirschmann. Courtesy of the State Library Victoria. Ref. H38849/2330.

As with all the children of Christian Ignatius, Charles Joseph was educated at a Moravian boarding school at Fulneck in Yorkshire from the age of six until he was 18. He then became a teacher in the Moravian school at Fairfield, Droylsden, on the eastern fringe of Manchester.

For three years from 1824, he was engaged as tutor to the young Comte de Pourtalès, also of Huguenot descent, in Neuchâtel, Switzerland. During his time in Switzerland, La Trobe developed a great passion for the outdoors life. He became a keen alpinist and was noted for his skill as a mountaineer, writing of his mountain climbs in his first book *The Alpenstock; Or, sketches of Swiss scenery and manners* (R. B. Seeley and W. Burnside, 1829). So popular was this work that he rather unexpectedly found himself in the occupation of travel writer. Then, possibly in reaction to the dread of wasting his whole life 'rambling', as he described it, La Trobe enrolled at Magdalene College at the University of Cambridge, but it is doubtful whether he ever attended a lecture—and he was soon rambling again in the Tyrol and parts of Italy and Switzerland. His second book, *The Pedestrian: A summer's ramble in the Tyrol* (R. B. Seeley and W. Burnside, 1832), recorded his experiences and impressions of the places he visited.

La Trobe next travelled in the Spring of 1832 when he accompanied Albert de Pourtalès on a tour of more than two years in North America. On the shipboard journey, they were befriended by Washington Irving, the renowned American writer, who described La Trobe as:

'...a man of a thousand occupations; a botanist, a geologist, a hunter of beetles and butterflies, a musical amateur, an artist; in short, a complete virtuoso...Never had a man more irons in the fire; and, consequently, never was a man more busy or more cheerful.'

The first part of their travels in America took them on a 'Western Tour' from St Louis through northern Missouri to Independence, then south to Kansas and Oklahoma with Washington Irving and Judge Henry Leavitt Ellsworth. Ellsworth had been appointed by President Jackson as Commissioner for the Indians, whose role it was to appraise land west of the Mississippi River for the resettlement of the Indian tribes, thus clearing the way for occupation by white settlers.

The visit to America was also an opportunity for La Trobe to meet his cousins, sons of Benjamin Henry La Trobe, the great American nineteenth-century architect, who was responsible for the redesign and rebuilding of the Capitol Building and the White House after 'the burning of Washington' during the war of 1812–15 between the United States and Great Britain.

La Trobe and Pourtalès concluded their long American journey with a tour through the southern states of Alabama, Georgia, South and North Carolina, and Tennessee before again turning to the north to Canada to experience the sights and lifestyles of Quebec, Montreal and Ottawa. La Trobe published his account of the long visit to the 'New World' in his *The Rambler in North America*, 2 vols, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1835; 2nd ed. London: Seeley and Burnside, 1836).

Still further adventure awaited the travellers as they ventured to Mexico, where they journeyed in a wide semi-circle from the port of Tampico through the Valley of Mexico to their departure point of Vera Cruz. La Trobe described their adventure in this fascinating, but disease-

infested and dangerous country in his fourth and last book *The Rambler in Mexico: 1834* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1836; London: Seeley and Burnside, 1836).

Soon after his return to England in 1835, La Trobe proposed marriage to Sophie de Montmollin, the ninth of 13 children of a wealthy Swiss aristocrat, Frédéric Auguste de Montmollin of Neuchâtel. They were married at the British Legation in Berne on 16 September 1835, and honeymooned at 'Jolimont', a house owned by the bride's uncle, which overlooked the beautiful Lake of Biene.

Through his family connections, La Trobe obtained in 1837 a Colonial Office commission for 17 months to inspect the schools in the British West Indies which had been provided for the education of nearly 800,000 recently emancipated slaves. It was on the strength of his three excellent reports to the British Parliament that he was offered the post of Superintendent of the newly-settled Port Phillip District of New South Wales.

La Trobe arrived in Melbourne on 3 October 1839 with Sophie and their two-year-old daughter, Agnes, bringing with them everything necessary for life in an outpost of the British Empire, including a prefabricated cottage. This remained their residence for all the time the family lived in Australia, three further children being born there.

La Trobe spent nearly 15 years in the colony, administering it during the formative and most turbulent period in its history. He successfully managed the colony through the lengthy process of separation from New South Wales achieved in 1851, at which time he was appointed Lieutenant Governor of the new Colony of Victoria. No sooner had the advance news of separation been received, and at the same time the new bridge over the Yarra River officially opened, than the single most revolutionary and momentous event in the history of the colony occurred. Gold in enormous quantities was discovered, creating the dominant and most far-reaching issue of La Trobe's many years in Victoria.

Despite La Trobe's mishandling of the goldfields administration, historian Geoffrey Serle, in his definitive study of the Victorian gold rush, came to the conclusion that, when faced with the appalling difficulties of the times, La Trobe had tried to 'govern chaos on a scale to which there are few or no parallels in British colonial history'. He had, in fact, managed to keep the colony for which he was responsible operating in circumstances 'in which the archangel Gabriel might have been found wanting'.

In February 1853, Sophie La Trobe, who had long suffered ill-health, and the children returned to Switzerland where she died on 30 January 1854. La Trobe was to read of her death in a newspaper which reached him before the sad news arrived by letter from members of the family. La Trobe had resigned his position in December 1852, but owing to a delay in the arrival of his replacement, Governor Hotham, he did not depart for England until May 1854. He returned to Switzerland to reclaim his children who were being cared for by their grandmother and aunt. Despite the illegality at that time in Britain of marriage with a deceased wife's sister, La Trobe was married again in Switzerland in 1855 to Sophie's widowed sister, Rose de Meuron, with whom he had two more children. Although he was never offered another Colonial Office posting, he was made a Commander of the Order of the Bath in 1858.

Charles Joseph La Trobe died in Litlington, East Sussex, on 4 December 1875, and is buried in the churchyard of St Michael the Archangel in that village. His widow, Rose, had the *Chapelle de l'Ermitage* erected to his memory in Neuchâtel in 1877–78, where the stained glass window by Australian artist Alan Sumner, a gift from the Victorian Government, was installed to commemorate the centenary of La Trobe's death in 1975.

In his nearly 15 years in the settlement, La Trobe made a significant contribution to the future cultural development of the infant city of Melbourne and the colony of Victoria. La Trobe was himself a patron, and often the instigator, of such cultural and learned bodies as the Philosophical Society (now the Royal Society of Victoria), the Mechanics' Institute (now the Melbourne Athenaeum), the Royal Melbourne Philharmonic Society, and the Royal Botanic Gardens.

La Trobe's vision for the colony under his command was for a not only Christian but a highly educated community, well versed in the arts and sciences. Universal education was a major concern of the Lieutenant-Governor, and this commonality of purpose brought him into contact with Melbourne's leading citizens including Judge Redmond Barry, and the politician Hugh Culling Eardley Childers. All three were instrumental in the establishment of a Public Library, now the State Library of Victoria, and of the University of Melbourne. Not only did they consider that the newly-separated colony of Victoria warranted a university just as much as did Sydney, but the gold discoveries provided the wherewithal for the establishment of both institutions. Shortly after La Trobe left Melbourne, the foundation stones for both the University of Melbourne and the Public Library of Victoria were laid on the same day—3 July 1854.

Under Barry's enthusiastic leadership as Chairman, the Library Trustees commissioned an impressive building from architect Joseph Reed which opened on 11 February 1856 with a stock of 3,846 volumes. One of the first free public libraries in the world, admission was free to anyone over 14 years of age: 'of respectable appearance...even though he be coatless...if only his hands are clean.' Female readers were catered for with a discrete seating area. Barry had earlier placed advertisements in the Melbourne newspapers, asking for suggestions for books to be acquired for the Library, but he received no replies. However, copies of the *Times* newspaper for the year 1800 were donated by G. M. Gallot, and 97 volumes (25 titles) presented by Lieutenant-Governor La Trobe on 10 November 1853 were on the shelves on opening day—the only donations received at that time. As historian John Barnes has noted:

As the first books ordered from London did not arrive until November 1854, La Trobe's books could be regarded as constituting the original collection of what is now the State Library.

The branches of knowledge represented in La Trobe's donation shed some light on his intellectual interests. It would appear that he was not a collector on the same scale, or with the same intensity as Redmond Barry whose considerable collection was catalogued and disposed of after his death in 1880. It is unlikely, given his lack of resources, that La Trobe ordered titles from book suppliers such as J. J. Guillaume in London, used by Barry to develop the collections of the

Supreme Court, the University of Melbourne, the Melbourne Public Library and his personal collection.

The subjects covered in La Trobe's donation link to his life and interests: his long-standing curiosity about natural history and geology, the fine arts, science and philosophy, religion, the New World, and art and travel. It is tempting to speculate that the inclusion of the *Maison Rustique*, dated 1835, was a title he brought with him to Australia as a 'do-it-yourself' manual for assembling his portable cottage. It is quite probable that La Trobe brought the 13 titles published before 1839 with him. Given his impecunious state for most of his time in Melbourne, it is more than likely that the remaining 12 titles came to him as gifts from friends and family in England and Switzerland, especially such works as Agassiz and Charpentier on glaciers, and Tschudi's *Travels in Peru, 1838–42*.

The number of items of Australian relevance is surprisingly small—only three titles: Bigge's *Report of the Commissioner of Inquiry into the State of the Colony of New South Wales*, (1822); *Immigration, 1841: Report from the Committee on Immigration*, (Sydney: 1841); and L. E. Threlkeld's (Sydney: 1850). While these were, no doubt, of great practical interest to him in his role of administrator, one may speculate that La Trobe gathered many more Australian titles which returned with him to England in 1854.

It is interesting to note that of the 24 titles in La Trobe's donation, three were published by his friend John Murray, namely the *Quarterly Review*, a highly-regarded conservative literary and political journal; Gladstone's *The State in its Relations with the Church*; and Buxton's *African Slave Trade*, reflecting his personal and family interest in this tragic history.

The London publishers of his own books, Seeley and Burnside, were represented with Mrs Barbara Anne Simon's *The Ten Tribes of Israel Historically Identified with the Aborigines of the Western Hemisphere*. One of a number of extraordinarily popular books which emerged during the early part of the nineteenth-century, it was based on the theory that American Indians were somehow linked to the ten lost tribes of Israel. Even the earliest explorers and settlers of the New World, including Christopher Columbus and President Thomas Jefferson, were intrigued by the possibility of encountering a lost remnant of the House of Israel in the New World. La Trobe himself had explored this notion in his own work *The Rambler in Mexico* (1836).

Included in his donation was *The Bridgewater Treatises* in 13 volumes. The Earl of Bridgewater, a gentleman naturalist, had commissioned eight *Treatises* upon his deathbed in 1829 to explore 'the Power, Wisdom, and Goodness of God, as manifested in the Creation'. Among the most widely circulated books of science in early nineteenth-century Britain, its appeal for La Trobe lay in its investigation of the parallels between science and religion.

La Trobe's donation of books to the Melbourne Public Library in 1853, five months before his departure, was not his only contribution to that institution. In June 1865, he offered a second and larger donation from his own library to the Librarian, Augustus Henry Tulk, for the Melbourne Public Library. The topics covered in this gift related, as before, to his perennial interests of science, travel, history and religion.

La Trobe had arrived in Port Phillip with a certainty about his civilizing mission and the institutions through which it would be expressed. By the time of his departure in 1854, he could look back on an extraordinary catalogue of achievements. At the time, however, these achievements were only grudgingly accepted since the flaws in his day-to-day management of the colony, especially his goldfields administration, had begun to emerge. However, appreciated by those who shared his vision for the new colony, he continued his links with Victoria through his practical support in developing the collections of the Melbourne Public Library.

Dianne Reilly

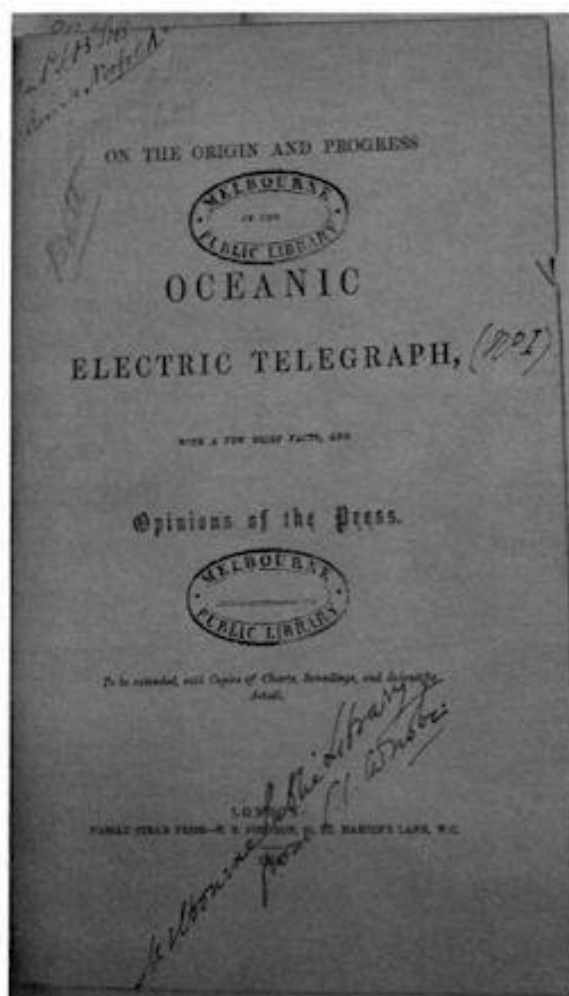
APPENDIX

LA TROBE'S BOOKS
First Donation of Books
Presented to the Melbourne Public Library by
Lieutenant Governor Charles Joseph La Trobe,
10 November 1853

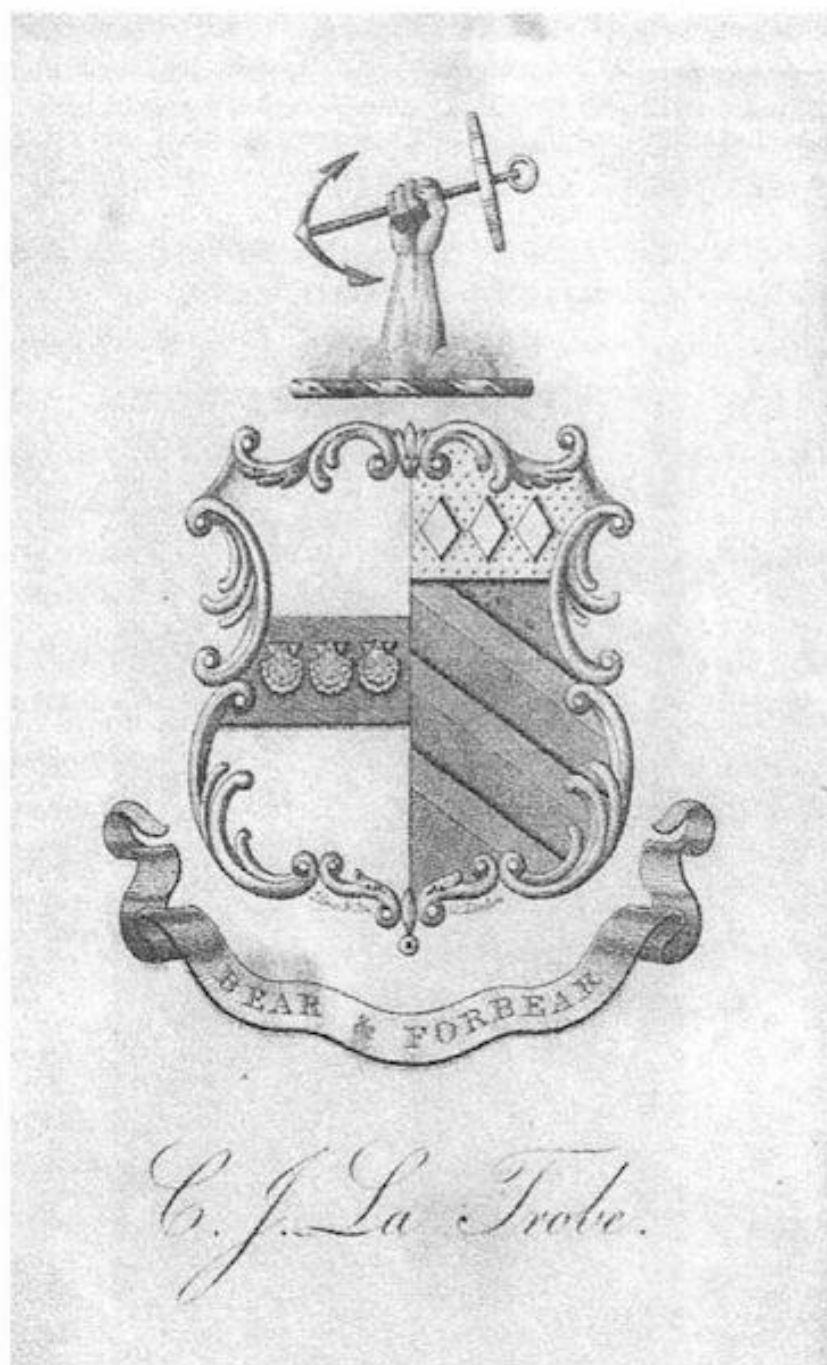
1. *The Comprehensive Bible*. Edited by W. Greenfield. (London: Samuel Bagster, 1827).
2. *Quarterly Review*, vol. I (Feb. 1809)–vol. LV (1836), (London: John Murray, 1809–1867). 55 vols.
3. *Maison Rustique du XIXe siècle: encyclopédie d'agriculture pratique* (Paris: Bureau du Journal d'Agriculture Pratique, 1835). 2 vols.
4. George W. D. Evans, *Classic and Connoisseur in Italy and Sicily* (London: Longman, 1835). 3 vols.
5. William Ewart Gladstone, *The State in its Relations with the Church* (London: John Murray, 1839).
6. Mrs Barbara Anne Simon, *The Ten Tribes of Israel Historically Identified with the Aborigines of the Western Hemisphere* (London: Seeley and Burnside, 1836).
7. Louis Agassiz, *Études sur les glaciers; ouvrage accompagné d'un atlas de 32 planches* (Neuchâtel: Jent et Gassmann, 1840).
8. Jean de Charpentier, *Essai sur les glaciers et sur le terrain erratique du bassin du Rhône* (Lausanne: Marc Ducloux, 1841).
9. Arnold Herman Ludwig Heeren, *A Manual of the History of the Political System of Europe and its Colonies: From its formation at the close of the fifteenth century, to its re-*

- establishment upon the fall of Napoleon*. Translated into English from the 5th German ed. (Oxford: Talboys, 1834). 2 vols.
10. Thomas Chalmers, *The Bridgewater Treatises on the Power, Wisdom and Goodness of God as Manifested in the Creation* (London: William Pickering, 1833–38). 13 vols.
 11. Mary Somerville, *On the Connexion of the Physical Sciences*. 3rd ed. (London: John Murray, 1836).
 12. Adriano (Adrien) Balbi, *Abrégé de Géographie* (Paris: Jules Renouard, 1833).
 13. *Immigration, 1841: Report from the Committee on Immigration, with the appendix, minutes of evidence, and replies to circular letter on the Aborigines* (Sydney: Government Printer, 1841).
 14. Johann Jakob von Tschudi, *Travels in Peru During the Years 1838–1842*. Translated from the German by Thomasina Ross. (London: David Bogue, 1847).
 15. William Fairbairn, *An Account of the Construction of the Britannia and Conway Tubular Bridges* (London: John Weale, 1849). 2 vols.
 16. Lancelot Edward Threlkeld, *A Key to the Structure of the Aboriginal Language...spoken by the Aborigines in the vicinity of Hunter River, Lake Macquarie, etc., New South Wales: together with comparisons of Polynesian and other dialects* (Sydney: Kemp and Fairfax, 1850).
 17. *Reports on the Progress of Zoology and Botany, 1841–42* (London: Ray Society, 1845). 2 vols.
 18. Robert Southey, *The Book of the Church*. 4th ed. (London: John Murray, 1837).
 19. George Grote, *Seven Letters on the Recent Politics of Switzerland* (London: T. C. Newby, 1847). Originally published in *The Spectator*.
 20. Thomas Fowell Buxton, *The African Slave Trade and its Remedy* (London: Murray, 1839).
 21. Charles Giles Bridle Daubeny, *A Description of Active and Extinct Volcanos: With remarks on their chemical phaenomena, and the character of their products as determined by the condition of the earth during the period of their formation* (London: W. Phillips, 1826).
 22. William Dallas Bernard, *Narrative of the Voyages and Services of the Nemesis from 1840 to 1843: And of the combined naval and military operations in China* (London: Henry Colburn, 1844).
 23. John Thomas Bigge, *Report of the Commissioner of Inquiry into the State of the Colony of New South Wales* (London: House of Commons, 1822).

24. Royal Society of Northern Antiquaries of Copenhagen, *Guide to Northern Archaeology; Edited for the use of English readers by the Earl of Ellesmere*. Translation of *Ledetraad til nordisk oldkyndighed* (London: James Bain, printed by Berling Brothers, Copenhagen, 1848). Inscription: 'Presented to the Melbourne Public Library, on the 17th day of Nov. 1853. By His Excellency C. J. LaTrobe'.
25. James Haines McCulloh, *Researches, Philosophical and Antiquarian, Concerning the Aboriginal History of America* (Baltimore: Fielding Lucas, 1829).



Book signature of C. J. La Trobe. Courtesy of the State Library Victoria.



The armorial bookplate of Charles Joseph La Trobe (Peake 3018).