

John Barnes

Charles La Trobe in Neuchâtel:

a research report

IN 1955 JACQUES PETITPIERRE (1870-1979), the Neuchâtel lawyer and local historian, published a substantial article, '*Les Deux Hymens Neuchâtelois du Premier Gouverneur de l'Etat de Victoria*' ['The Two Neuchâtel Marriages of the First Governor of the State of Victoria'] in his journal, *Patrie Neuchateloise* [Neuchâtel Homeland]. The most detailed biographical account of Charles Joseph La Trobe then available, it was informative about his family relationships and emphasised his connections with Neuchâtel. Petitpierre had hoped to write a biography of La Trobe, and had assembled a collection of material that is now in the *Archives de l'État de Neuchâtel* [Archives of the State of Neuchâtel]. (Thanks to the initiative of then La Trobe Librarian Dianne Reilly, who photocopied over 4,000 pages for the State Library of Victoria, it is now possible for researchers like myself to access Petitpierre's collection in Melbourne.) A man with a close knowledge of local history and himself a member of a prominent Neuchâtel family, Peptitpierre wrote about the town with an authority that no outsider could hope to equal, and his article has been regarded as an important resource for La Trobe researchers ever since. Unfortunately, he was not always reliable, and one of the errors he made has led to a serious misunderstanding of La Trobe's Swiss experience.

Just how influential Petitpierre has been can be demonstrated by comparing the accounts of La Trobe's arrival in Neuchâtel given in different biographical dictionaries:

He received the usual Moravian education, with a view to entering the Moravian ministry, to which his father belonged, but abandoned this design in order to travel. He began by wandering in Switzerland 1824-6 [...]. [*Dictionary of National Biography*, 1885-1900]

In 1824 he went to Neuchâtel, Switzerland, as tutor to the family of the count de Pourtalès who was also of Huguenot extraction. [*Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 1965]

He received a Moravian education, with a view to following his father in the Moravian ministry, but abandoned this for teaching. In 1824 he became the tutor to the son of the Count de Pourtalès in Neuchâtel [...]. [*New Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004]

The difference between the nineteenth-century account and the later ones is the result of Petitpierre's article. He wrote of La Trobe: '*Un soir d'octobre 1824, à 23 ans, venu de Bâle par les vallées de la Birse, de la Suze—puis par Bienne—il arrive à Neuchâtel comme précepteur chez les Pourtalès.*' ['On an October evening in 1824, at the age of 23, coming from Basle via the valleys of the Birse and Suze, then Bienne, he arrived in Neuchâtel as tutor in the Pourtalès family.'] This is the earliest statement of what has become the accepted version of the reason for La Trobe's first stay in Switzerland.



Mr La Trobe

Unsigned pencil drawing of Charles Joseph La Trobe as a young man by, c. 1830.

When I first began to research La Trobe's life, I expected to find details that would support Petitpierre's statement. (I did not know what to make of Petitpierre's single sentence describing La Trobe's performance as tutor: '*Durant deux ans, il continue à s'y instruire en self made man*'. [For two years he built up his skills in this position like a self made man'.] As everyone else seems to have done, I ignored it!) The fact that La Trobe and the elder Pourtalès son had travelled together in Britain, North America and Mexico lent an initial plausibility to the claim. Albert-Alexandre de Pourtalès, born in 1812, was eleven years younger than La Trobe, and both Ellsworth and Washington Irving, with whom they travelled on the American prairie, thought that La Trobe was 'a tutor or travelling mentor, to the Swiss'.¹ As the Englishman and the Swiss had become travelling companions only in 1831, I had questions about their previous relationship. When did they first meet? Did the Pourtalès family know La Trobe before he went to Neuchâtel? If La Trobe had been brought from England seven years earlier to become the tutor of a twelve-year old Albert and his nine-year old brother Guillaume, as Petitpierre asserted, why had he been chosen for the post? Did he return to England after two-and-a-half years because he had not been a success in the role? How did it come about that he and Albert travelled together? What was the exact relationship between them on their extended travels? Neuchâtel was then a Prussian principality, and it seemed very odd that a rich and powerful family, moving in the highest circles at the Prussian court in Berlin where Albert's father was an aide to the king, would entrust the education of their two sons to a young Englishman with no qualifications and no teaching experience except at a provincial religious school. My doubts about the accuracy of Petitpierre's claim increased the more I got to know about La Trobe and the Pourtalès family.

Petitpierre had taken the details of La Trobe's route to Neuchâtel from La Trobe's book, *The Alpenstock*, which describes his stay in Switzerland from October 1824 to his departure for England in March 1827; but Petitpierre had taken no notice of what La Trobe says about himself. According to the text, La Trobe leased an apartment in the town where he studied during the winter months, and was outdoors exploring the countryside as soon as the weather permitted. On the face of it, the version of his life that the book gives contradicts the claim that he was employed in teaching two young boys in the Pourtalès home. The picture that La Trobe paints of himself is of a free agent following his own interests, not of a man who has taken on new responsibilities. He tells the reader that he arrived in Neuchâtel 'under the influence of peculiar feelings', after a year of 'severe trials' ('trial' is a favoured Moravian term for the vicissitudes of life), which had left behind 'heavy thoughts';² and his narrative reveals him finding renewal and self-fulfilment in both the sociable life of the town and solitary excursions into the Alps.

It seemed improbable that La Trobe could have completely erased from his narrative any trace of his employment as a tutor. But if he had, his private correspondence and journals would surely give some clue. In going through La Trobe's papers I kept an eye out for allusions – however slight – to his having taught Albert as a boy. There was

nothing. Not once does La Trobe ever refer to Albert as having been his student. There is certainly nothing to suggest a former tutor-student relationship in two surviving letters (written after La Trobe's return from Victoria) in which Albert addresses him as "Dearest Latrobe", and calls him 'my old chum'.³ When Albert, who had become the Prussian ambassador to Paris, died suddenly in December 1861, 'in the midst of a distinguished & honourable career', La Trobe lamented the loss of 'my old friend, companion & relative'.⁴ The words describe exactly the relationship between the two men. After an extensive examination of La Trobe's papers, I concluded that La Trobe did not go to Neuchâtel in 1824 to become the tutor 'chez les Pourtalès'.

II

This conclusion was reinforced by the surprising discovery that the name of the tutor in the Pourtalès household when La Trobe arrived in Neuchâtel was publicly recorded. César-Henri Monvert (1784-1848) was so highly regarded that he was included in the two-volume *Biographie Neuchâteloise* (1863), where he is described admiringly as '*en quelque sorte le véritable fondateur de la bibliothèque de la ville*' ['in a way the true founder of the town's library'], and is himself likened to '*une bibliothèque vivante*'⁵ ['a living library']. He had taken up the post in 1819 and remained with the family until 1838. A Neuchâtelois who had studied languages, literature and philosophy, as well as theology, he had been ordained a clergyman, in which capacity he was the chaplain to the Hôpital Pourtalès, founded by Albert's grandfather, as well as having a parish. On becoming the tutor to the two boys he gave up his ministry, and devoted the rest of his life to teaching and scholarship. On leaving the Pourtalès family in 1838 he became the first town librarian, in 1840 a professor of literature at the gymnasium, and in 1842 professor of sacred literature at the academy of Neuchâtel.

Monvert had a taste for art as well as literature, and his own accomplishments included drawing with pencil; he is said to have filled several albums with pencil portraits of '*personnages neuchâteloise authentifiés*'⁶ ['identified persons in Neuchâtel'], among whom may have been La Trobe. In 1980 the great-grandson of Auguste Montmollin, La Trobe's brother-in-law, donated to the State Library of Victoria a pencil sketch of a tousle-headed young La Trobe, on the verso of which is an inscription which includes the statement: '*Crayon peut-être de Toeppfer ou aussi de son ami, César-Henri Monvert*' ['Possibly a pencil drawing of Toeppfer or his friend César-Henri Monvert']. Rodolphe Topffer (1799-1846) was the son of the painter Adam Wolfgang Topffer (1766-1847), who had been drawing master to the Empress Josephine, and so had close connection with the Pourtalès couple (at Malmaison Albert's father had been her master-of-horse and his mother a lady-in-waiting). Rodolphe and Monvert were friends, and the drawing indicates that La Trobe knew both of them. Rodolphe is known as 'the father of the comic strip', and La Trobe may have been remembering his innovative drawings when in his retirement he tried his hand at a sort of black-and-white comic strip, 'The Bamboon' to entertain his young daughter Daisy.⁷

To the young La Trobe who had much to learn, and whose enthusiasm for painting seems to have been stimulated by his friendship with Neuchâtel artists, Monvert would have been a valuable acquaintance. However, I have not been able to find out when La Trobe first met him or how well they knew each other, and have not come across any reference to him in La Trobe's personal papers. There is, however, a link that should be noted. Monvert was an intimate friend of Mathias Gabriel Lory (1784-1846), the painter generally known as Lory fils to distinguish him from his father, also a painter. During his time in the Pourtalès household Monvert collaborated with Lory fils on three illustrated books, to which he supplied the text. Petitpierre attributes to Lory fils an unsigned watercolour of La Trobe that is in his collection. Lory fils had a close relationship with the Pourtalès family, and from La Trobe's correspondence with Albert's mother (whom Lory fils painted) it is clear that he was friendly with the painter.

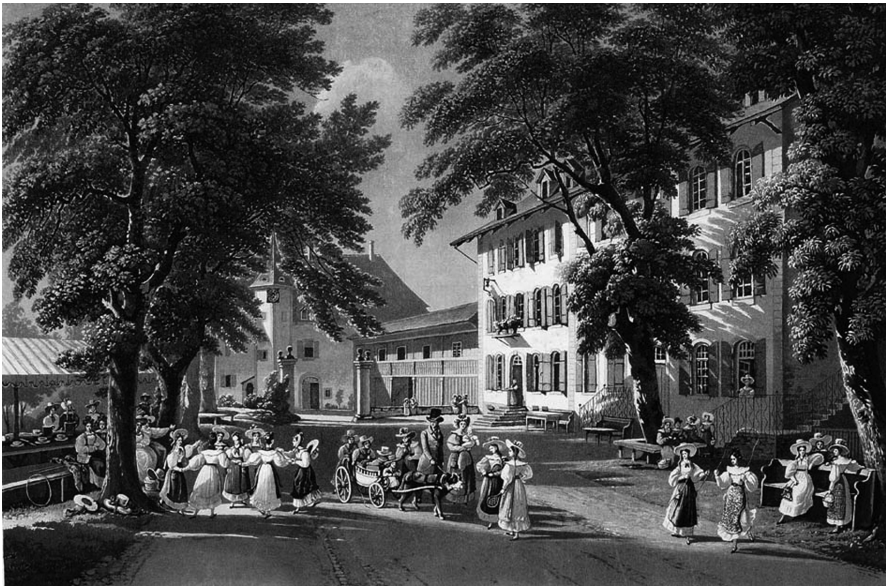
The position of a tutor in a great household could be ambiguous: not quite at the level of the family and yet above that of the servants. Monvert, however, was a bourgeois and a man of reputation before he took up the post, and his later career indicates his high standing in the local community. According to the authors of *Biographie Neuchâteloise* he benefited from his years with the Pourtalès family, the travels he took with them helping to develop '*les rares talents qu'il possédait*' ['the rare talents that he possessed'].⁸

Monvert was Albert's tutor until he went to Geneva for further study in 1830 or 1831, and the authors of *Biographie Neuchâteloise* were of the opinion that Albert '*a fait le plus grand honneur à l'éducation qu'il devait à son précepteur*' ['had been a great credit to the education he received from his tutor'].⁹ Perhaps Monvert should be given credit for Albert's fluent and elegant French prose, which even his political opponent Bismarck acknowledged, and which was put to good use in drafting official despatches at the court in Berlin.

III

Albert's studies at Geneva were a preparation for entry to the Prussian diplomatic service. Along with Englishman Henry Reeve (who later wrote on foreign affairs for the *Times* of London and became editor of the *Edinburgh Review*) and Prussian Baron von Ende, he was attending a private course of lectures on constitutional law given by a remarkable Italian professor, Pellegrino Rossi.¹⁰ Although a Catholic, Rossi gained a chair at the University of Geneva and was elected to Cantonal Council of Geneva (his marriage to a Protestant Genevese may have helped). His proposals for a Swiss constitution aroused hostility, and in 1832 he moved to a chair in Paris. His later involvement in Italian politics led to his assassination in Rome in 1848, which prompted Pope Pius IX to exclaim: 'Count Rossi has died a martyr to duty'.¹¹

There is no account of how diligent a student Albert was under M. Monvert, but in Geneva, despite the intellectual stimulus at hand, he was restless and increasingly disinclined to continue. (Anyone who remembers their university days will recognise the symptoms!) He left Geneva in mid-1831 but eventually resumed his studies after several years during which he travelled abroad with La Trobe.



Intérieur de l'établissement de Montmirail à l'heure de la récréation des pensionnaires

Aquatinte, dessiné par G. Lory fils ; gravé par J. Hurlimann, [Suisse] : [s.n.], [vers 1832].
See <http://bpun.unine.ch/icono/JPG01/PANE2.17.jpg>

The 'memoranda' that La Trobe kept of his movements indicates that he went to Lausanne and Vevey, on Lake Geneva, in early May 1831, and spent a few days visiting different places in the company of 'M. & Mme de P.' who are mentioned for the first time.¹² There is no mention of Albert, but it was during this short excursion or soon after that he must have met him. La Trobe notes two overnight visits in June to the Pourtalès château at Greng beside Lake Morat, and then: 'Quitted Neuchâtel finally for Greng in company of the Montmollin family Mad de P. Al. etc etc on the morning of Friday 8th July'. The next five days: 'Spent in very pleasant society at Greng'. The entry for 14 July begins: 'About 10 o'clock my companion & myself quitted Greng accompanied during our first days drive by Guillaume & Auguste de Montmollin'. A little conjecture is involved, but it seems pretty clear that this was the beginning of La Trobe's close association with the Pourtalès family. Perhaps the most significant detail in the entries is that La Trobe went to Greng with the Montmollin family. Mme de Montmollin was the sister of Albert's father, Count Frédéric de Pourtalès, and the families were very close. The Maison Montmollin fronted on the market square in Neuchâtel, and La Trobe had quarters near the Hotel de Ville which was not far away. He probably met the younger members of the Montmollin family early in his first stay and would have heard of their cousins Albert and Guillaume from them; but a remark about Albert in a letter written on 30 June 1832 ('Our acquaintance has now had nearly one year's standing')¹³ puts it beyond doubt that they did not meet before mid-1831.

La Trobe had returned to England reluctantly in March 1827, uncertain of what the future held. When he came back to Neuchâtel in 1829 it was as a published author (having written *The Alpenstock*) and a disappointed office-seeker (having failed to gain through patronage a government post which would have provided him with a regular income). Now in July 1831, when he was returning with material for a second book of travel, his attachment to Neuchâtel was greater than ever because of his feeling for Sophie de Montmollin. Albert was keen to give up his studies and travel, and the arrangement that the Englishman would act as his guide was to the advantage of both parties.

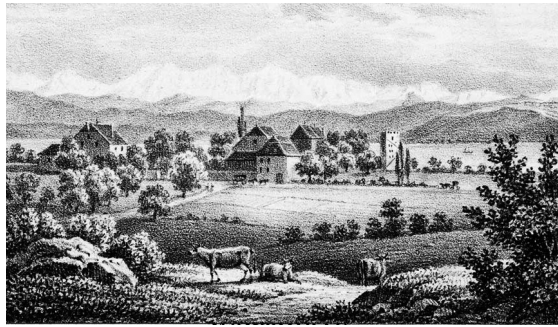
The travellers reached London on 24 July and, after sight-seeing in the capital, began on 2 August a journey through England, Scotland and Ireland.¹⁴ On 10 November, Albert caught the ferry at Dover for Calais, and they did not meet again until La Trobe went to Paris the following year, arriving there in March 1832, to prepare for the visit to North America. The trip through the British Isles must have been accounted a success by all concerned, and now the Pourtalès family was prepared to finance an excursion to North America and Mexico. Albert reached his majority during this second trip, but La Trobe continued to have control of their finances, which he accounted for to Count de Pourtalès. It had been decided by Albert's parents that he should be left 'quite in the dark' as to the precise nature of La Trobe's position with regard to him. Albert knew nothing of a paper that they gave La Trobe; a paper which, apparently, authorised him to act *in loco parentis*.¹⁵ Publicly, the two men were independent travellers who had decided to travel together, and for the latter part of the American trip and in Mexico they were accompanied by a third traveller.

In his travel books, *The Rambler in North America* and *The Rambler in Mexico*, La Trobe is very circumspect in his descriptions of the younger man's behaviour. Washington Irving in *A Tour on the Prairie* skilfully hints that Albert was a handful, likening his relationship to La Trobe (who is identified as 'Mr L., an Englishman by birth, but descended from a foreign stock, who had all the buoyancy and accommodating spirit of a native of the Continent') to that of Telemachus (son of Odysseus), 'being apt like his prototype, to give occasional perplexity and disquiet to his Mentor'. Irving describes the young Swiss Count as 'full of talent and spirit, but galliard in the extreme, and prone to every kind of wild adventure'.¹⁶ At times there was friction between the two, requiring considerable patience and tact on La Trobe's part. The letters he wrote to Albert's anxious mother discussed her son's moral development, and are as much reports on his attitudes and behaviour as travelogues. La Trobe was not a tutor in the Pourtalès household, but when he and Albert travelled together he was, de facto, a moral tutor.

The excursion to the new World began at Harve de Grace in April 1832 and ended at the same port in July 1834. Albert went to join his parents in Berlin and La Trobe went back to England to stay with his ailing father at the Moravian settlement of Fairfield, near Manchester. On 30 May 1835, his book on their North American travels having been published, La Trobe set out once again for Neuchâtel. On 30 July he became engaged to Sophie de Montmollin and on 16 September they were married. As Albert was Sophie's

cousin, the Englishman and the Swiss Count now had a family relationship.

Nearly 11 years after his arrival at Neuchâtel La Trobe was married to a Neuchâteloise and connected to two leading families in the tightly knit community – the next best thing, one might think, to being a Neuchâtelois himself. Over the rest of his life there were to be many visits and extended stays with the



Vue de Montmirail

Aquantinte, H. Baumann del, Werner, lith., [S.l.] : [s.n.], [vers 1845].

See <http://bpun.unine.ch/icono/JPG01/PANE4.08.03.jpg>.

Montmollin and Pourtalès families. Although he never owned a house there – Jolimont in distant Melbourne was the only home that he ever owned – and although he strongly identified himself as an Englishman, for La Trobe Neuchâtel was an emotional centre to which he returned many times. Why was he so deeply attracted to the place, and why did he originally go there?

IV

It is easy to see why Petitpierre's misleading explanation for La Trobe's arrival at Neuchâtel in 1824 has been taken up. It provides a clear and readily comprehended reason for his choosing to go there rather than somewhere else on the Continent. One would be inclined to say that, the episode having occurred so early in La Trobe's life, it hardly matters what is believed about his reasons for going to Neuchâtel, if it were not for the undeniable fact that this decision affected the whole course of his life. Had he gone, say, to Herrnhut or another of the Moravian centres in Germany, his life would have been very different, indeed.

Until he arrived in Neuchâtel La Trobe had never lived outside a Moravian community. He had not settled on a profession, and what little is known of his life at this time suggests that he was doubtful that he had a religious vocation. Like their father his two older brothers had both professed the religious life: Peter, the eldest, had followed his father into the Moravian church, but John had chosen to become an Anglican clergyman. La Trobe had been teaching at the Moravian school at Fairfield, which was the usual interim arrangement for those who had completed their own education and were intending to begin the further study required to qualify for the ministry. He never returned to teaching after leaving there in 1824. From *The Alpenstock* it is clear that at the time of his arrival in Neuchâtel he is dispirited; and when he leaves he is quite explicit that 'the path I must pursue would seem to be questionable and obscure'.¹⁷

In a letter to Albert's mother in 1834, after returning from the excursion to North America and Mexico, La Trobe discussed his future which was still unclear. (There is a

considerable irony that he was able to reassure her about her son's future while being uncertain about his own.) Explaining what Switzerland means to him, he uses a striking image:

Switzerland has twice been an asylum to me – once ten years ago this very autumn when after my mothers death I paid it a first visit, & secondly in 1829, when disgusted with having lost a year in awaiting the tardy fulfilment of a promise of patronage by Lord Godrich [*sic*], then prime minister, I returned to my unobtrusive perch among your mountains like a bird escaped from its cage.¹⁸

In Switzerland, freed from the restrictions he felt in England, he was able to indulge what he calls in his 1830 journal 'my wandering disposition'. During his first visit, following his mother's death, he delighted in the Alpine scenery; but during his second he was asking himself whether 'this same life of wandering & vagabondising [*sic*] to which I have become so much attached' was the life that God intended him to pursue. In an extended passage of introspection at the beginning of his 1830 'summer ramble' he wrote:

Supposing the words addressed to me "What dost thou here Elijah?" I have but a sorry answer to give – Lord I am on my road to the tyrol, & mean to write, & paint, & botanize, & amuse myself as well as I can, & perhaps shall publish another – pshaw this is humiliating & leads me to say internally – Well! I almost hope that much as I love this live [*sic*] & the pursuits with which I enliven it this will be the last summer of the kind.¹⁹

Unexpectedly, the following year the Pourtalès family provided him with the opportunity to continue travelling and writing, and so postpone for a few years a commitment to a settled occupation. With his marriage, however, he could no longer please himself, he needed regular paid employment, and the freewheeling life of travelling and writing had to end.

In coming to Switzerland initially La Trobe was not rejecting his family's Moravianism, but he was, in the colloquialism of today, trying to sort himself out away from family and familiar scenes. How deeply he felt his mother's death we do not know. Surprisingly, he nowhere speaks of her and it may be that the main significance of her death was that she bequeathed some money to him, enabling him to lead what he afterwards called 'an idle gentlemanly life'.²⁰

In the context of what was called 'the English invasion' of the Continent after the defeat of Napoleon, the attraction of Switzerland for a keen traveller such as La Trobe was already is hardly to be wondered at. Byron's poetry, especially *Childe Harold*, contributed to the popularity of the Swiss Alps with the English, and La Trobe's taste for Byron is apparent in *The Alpenstock*. It may be relevant that Byron's death, which had such an emotional impact, occurred in April 1824, the same month as that of La Trobe's mother. Neuchâtel had interesting literary associations, but what probably determined La Trobe's choice of the town over others in Switzerland was that there was a group of Moravians there. He intended to lead an independent life, but he was not less a Moravian.

A Moravian girls' boarding school had been established at the château of Montmirail in 1766, and was still functioning when La Trobe arrived in 1824. (Peter La

Trobe was later to enrol his daughter in the school.) Montmirail was about five miles from the centre of Neuchâtel, and La Trobe passed through its 'hospitable gateway' almost every Sunday afternoon, as he tells us in *The Alpenstock*. He may have known some of the female teachers, and he certainly knew the principal, Rev. Wilhelm Verbeek, and his wife, with whom he records going on walks. Mrs Verbeek was a niece of Frederick William Foster, La Trobe's uncle by marriage, and as she was only six years older than La Trobe there is a strong probability that they already knew each other from the school at Fulnek or that at Fairfield. Montmirail, La Trobe tells the 'indifferent reader' of *The Alpenstock*, was one of the 'bright spots' in his memory; such is the intensity of his attachment that he thinks it necessary to 'bridle my feelings and my pen'.²¹

V

No-one who reads *The Alpenstock* with any care can doubt that during his first visit La Trobe found fulfilment in the life he lived in Neuchâtel, and that he quickly developed a sense of belonging there. At the end of his narrative he writes of his having to leave 'a country which, much as I may love my own, had long ceased to be a foreign land to me'.²² Evoking the departure scene, he writes of how, from the spot 'whence the approaching traveller catches his first view of the Alps, I turned once more to look back upon the home I was quitting'.²³ After only two and a half years the place had become 'home'.