

THE IMPORTANCE OF

*Governor
Charles LaTrobe
shared with his
social circle an
artistic sensibility
and an
admiration
for the antique.
Paul Fox
celebrates the
150th
anniversary of
the arrival in
Melbourne of
this patron of
the arts and
sciences.*

When one hundred and fifty years ago Superintendent La Trobe arrived in Port Phillip, his first impressions were far from complimentary: the arts and sciences were unborn, society was in its infancy, and nature was in swaddling. Six years later, however, La Trobe had lost enough of his European sensibility to write this pithy bush epigram: *you will understand eating salt meat and dry bread is out of question when you cannot secure water*. The occasion of this reflection was a foray La Trobe made into the wilds of Gippsland in 1845.

Nowadays it is difficult to imagine the extraordinary preparations and stratagems a journey to Gippsland necessitated before the expedition could even begin: horses were sent ahead to the Bass River in Westernport, a ride to Dandenong was undertaken to meet a travelling companion which was followed by a boat trip over the Bay. Such efforts and privations were soon forgotten, however, when La Trobe, standing on a small rise, spied innumerable picturesque inlets, bays and islands unfolding toward Wilson's Promontory. La Trobe was a traveller in search of the picturesque; so were his circle.

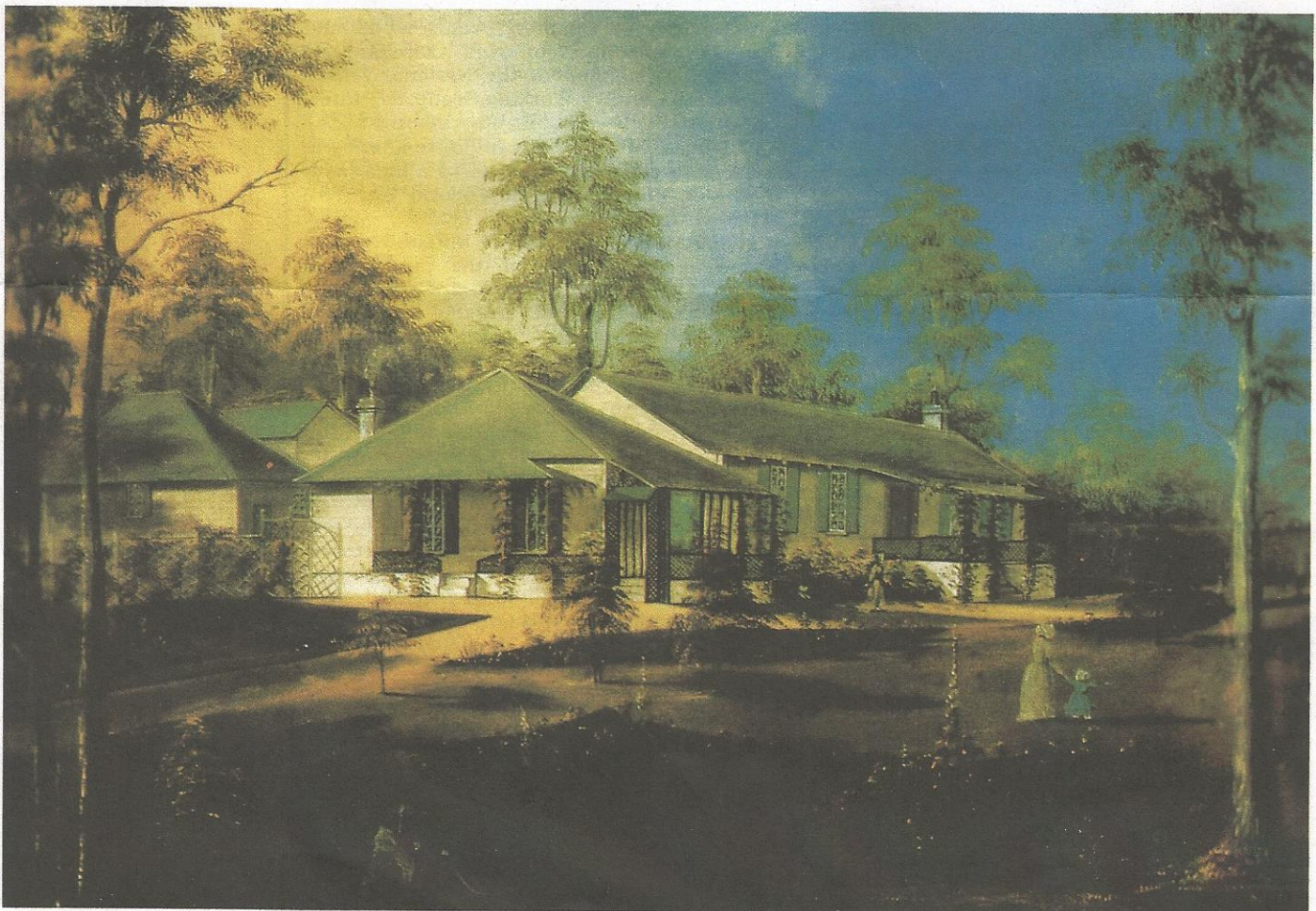
This artistic sensibility also informed their admiration for the antique. One of the circle's members, Redmond Barry, the Commissioner of the Court of Requests, saw it best expressed in the great artistic achievement of human history; and in a lecture delivered to the Mechanics Institute dwelt on the orders of architecture and on the sculpture of antiquity.

By contrast, La Trobe found the antique both in the woods of the colony when he discovered at Dandenong enormous red gums carved with huge native figures and marked with what he believed were inscriptions made by the explorers, Hume and Hovell; and in the Richmond Paddock, near Jolimont where he sketched the few remaining gums so as to record what the country had once been like.

It was at Jolimont that La Trobe and his wife Sophie established their home; Sophie raised their children; Susan Meade stitched tapestry when not attending to her duties as governess; La Trobe pursued his passion for natural history by observing the habits of the insects and reading Darwin's *Voyages*; and the garden was established by planting bulbs, scotch roses, vines and Australian flora.

Jolimont was La Trobe's retreat from the exacting and ever-pressing official duties of administering the district. Even so, La Trobe escaped the official world of Melbourne as often as he could by journeying up country. Once free of the town, he would seek out friends such as the well connected Captain Bunbury, who had settled to sheep farming below Mount William at the edge of the Grampians. On one such trip, La Trobe arrived at Bunbury's after '*un grand galope*' of 2 weeks and with unflagging energy set off with his host to climb Mount William, scaling a 150 feet precipitous rock face to reach its summit where they sketched the grand panorama which lay before them.

Not all La Trobe's excursions were so dar-



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ing; a more sedate demeanour was adopted when visiting Georgiana McCrae, the daughter of the Duke of Gordon who had exchanged her father's castle for *un hameau* by Arthur's Seat. On such visits La Trobe carefully planted cuttings of vines he had brought from Jolimont.

During these informal progresses over the district, La Trobe observed the country acutely, delighting in finding new plants, and collecting botanical specimens and fossils. On one such occasion his passion for geological science led him to make another discovery. At Geelong he lowered himself down a 20 foot deep lime pit to collect fossil shells which he surmised had been on the beach at 'no very distant period'. Soon, however, he was above ground, hearing of the discovery of some old keys. These were the famous Geelong Keys which La Trobe believed had been dropped 150 years earlier and which have since been seen as evidence of the Portuguese discovery of eastern Australia a century before Cook.

Although now lost, the existence of the keys cannot be doubted; the same cannot, however, be said of every find made in the colony at the time. In 1844, an up-country hand passed to his master, Edward Curr, a skull — claiming it belonged to a Bunyip. The find excited great interest amongst the scientific gentlemen who composed La Trobe's circle and in the following year anatomical drawings of the skull were presented in the Tasmanian *Journal of Arts and Science*, edited by the Tasmanian naturalist Ronald Gunn. Later Gunn had doubts as to the authenticity of the claim, believe the skull to belong to a camel which had escaped into the wilds. The learned had been duped by a tall story from the bush!

For discussion of scientific matters La Trobe increasingly turned to Ronald Gunn, engaging him in a lengthy correspondence on scientific matters and sending him seeds, plants and botanical and geological specimens. La Trobe also talked with Dr Hobson, the Port Phillip naturalist, who corresponded with the eminent English geologist, Robert Owen of the Royal College of Surgeons' Museum, London, concerning fossil teeth he had found at Mount Macedon; and whose love of natural history was such that even when weakened by ill health he continued to collect on the Yarra by Major Davidson's residence. When Hobson died in 1848, La Trobe found the loss of Hobson's "intelligent mind to which I could communicate any matter of interest that came under my notice in my various journeys" profound.

In the absence of scientists, Port Phillip of the 1840s paled in comparison with the scientific world La Trobe had been accustomed to at Neuchatel, Switzerland, where the great natural historian, Louis Agassiz, had established a Society of Natural Historians to which La Trobe had been elected a member in 1837. Despite this, La Trobe remained undeterred, encouraging scientific pursuits wherever he could in the colony. He became patron of the Melbourne Mechanics Institute, donated books and maps to its library, gave the specimens collected during his journeys to its museum, and supported an application for government funding of the museum which



was refused by his superior, Governor Gipps.

La Trobe's public patronage of science was hamstrung by his Sydney superiors before the separation of Port Phillip from New South Wales. The proclamation of the colony of Victoria in 1851, however, together with the wealth generated by the discovery of gold, gave La Trobe both the freedom and the means to appoint the naturalist, William Swainson, to describe the timber trees of the colony, Ferdinand von Mueller to act as Government Botanist and Alfred Selwyn to the position of Director of the Geological Survey. La Trobe also authorised the establishment of the Melbourne Public Library, to which he donated 150 volumes before leaving the colony.

In establishing such positions and institutions, La Trobe brought to bear on colonial life a generosity, civility and a belief in the importance of knowledge which has earned him the lasting appreciation of generations of Victorians.

To acknowledge this contribution, the State Library of Victoria, with the aid of the Swiss Bank, is staging an exhibition, *La Trobe and his Circle* between 4 October and 18 November. During those 6 weeks you will be able to meet La Trobe, his wife, Susannah Meade, Georgiana McCrae, Captain Bunbury, Redmond Barry, Ferdinand Mueller and others of La Trobe's circle. Call on them, and discover La Trobe's world.

Paul Fox is a historian working with the Museum of Victoria.

A recently restored water-colour of Governor La Trobe (above) and a *View of Jolimont, Melbourne, Port Phillip 1843-4*. Pastel on paper, artist unknown. La Trobe Library Collection (left).

Correction:
Portrait believed to be of Ronald Campbell Gunn.