

Gipps–La Trobe Correspondence 1839–1846

edited by

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Introduction

Charles Joseph La Trobe arrived in Melbourne on 30 September 1839 and next day entered on his duties as Superintendent of the four-year-old settlement there. Its population had quickly grown to nearly six thousand, of whom more than two-thirds were males; but its government was still that instituted in September 1836 when Captain William Lonsdale was appointed Police Magistrate to control its five hundred or so inhabitants, with 'general superintendence of all such matters as required the immediate exercise of the authority of Government', though with little more power than the magistrates in other districts of New South Wales.¹ However, the visit of Governor Sir Richard Bourke in March 1837 led, slowly, to decisions to improve the administration, following his recommendation that owing to the difficulty of communication with Sydney, a 'Lieut. Governor or Commandant, with Civil as well as Military Authority' should be appointed.² Next April Lord Glenelg, the Secretary of State, agreed to this proposition, and it took him only nine months to select, in January 1839, Charles La Trobe to be Superintendent of Port Phillip.³

The La Trobe family were descended from French Protestants who, having emigrated to Holland after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 confronted them with religious persecution at home, accompanied William of Orange to England, and thence to Ireland, in the Glorious Revolution of 1688–89. After the battle of the Boyne they settled in Dublin, where La Trobe's grandfather, Benjamin, was born in 1728. He attended the University of Glasgow rather than the Anglican Trinity College, Dublin, and on returning to Ireland organized a Moravian congregation there.

The Moravians, 'descended' from the sixteenth-century Bohemian brethren, were at this time leading a pietist reform movement based on strong personal devotion. John Wesley had visited their headquarters at Herrnhut in Saxony in 1738, the year when they established a society in London in Fetter Lane. The Moravian Episcopal church was recognized by the British parliament in 1749,

¹ Instructions to Lonsdale, 14 September 1836, *HRV*, i, 49 ff., espec. 52.

² Bourke to Glenelg, 14 June 1837, *HRA*, xviii, 782.

³ Glenelg to Gipps, 3 April 1838 and 29 January 1839, *HRA*, xix, 353 and 785; Gipps to Normanby, 4 November 1839, *HRA*, xx, 385.

and in spreading throughout England it set up a centre at Fulneck, near Leeds, in Yorkshire. To take charge of it, the Reverend Benjamin La Trobe was moved from Dublin. Here in Fulneck, he met his wife, Anna Antes, another Moravian and third-generation Pennsylvanian, and it was here that La Trobe's father, Christian, was born in 1758. Seven years later the family moved to the Fetter Lane headquarters, and here Benjamin became the general superintendent of the Moravians in Great Britain and Ireland, and before long president of the Society for the Furtherance of the Gospel. His tact, kindness, tolerance, humour and exemplary conduct soon won the respect of the many who knew him and helped to dispel some of the prejudices against his church. He soon became widely known in London society and a friend of such different people as Samuel Johnson, Charles Burney, the organist and music historian, and the future Admiral Sir Charles Middleton.

It was in this atmosphere that La Trobe's father, Christian, grew up before going to finish his education at Niesky in German Silesia in 1771. He returned to it in 1784 when he was ordained, two years before his father's death. He too was an accomplished musician, friend of the Burneys and devoted to the fine arts as well as his church. But he did not ignore the latter, and in 1787 became secretary to the Society of the Furtherance of the Gospel and in 1795 secretary to the United Brethren, as the Moravians had become known. He became associated with the English anti-slavery societies. These and the growing evangelical movement in the Church of England widened the range of his acquaintances, while he toiled tirelessly in promoting the missionary work of his church. On this account he visited South Africa in 1815–16 and it is clear from his correspondence that he was on good terms with both the Secretary of State, Lord Bathurst, and his Under-secretary, Henry Goulburn. Like his father, he had considerable musical talents. He was a friend of the composer Joseph Haydn, and himself composed many anthems, chorales, hymns and instrumental works; between 1806 and 1825 he edited six volumes of a *Selection of Sacred Music from the Works of the most eminent Composers of Germany and Italy*, thus introducing many works to British music-lovers.⁴

It was in this religious and cultured environment that Charles La

⁴ For information on La Trobe's family see Edward C. Carter (ed.), *The Virginia Journals of Benjamin Henry La Trobe*, vol. 1 (Yale University Press for the Maryland Historical Society, New Haven and London, 1977), introduction, xvii ff.; Frank R. Bradlow (ed.), *Journal of a Visit to South Africa in 1815 and 1816 by the Rev. C. I. Latrobe* (Cape Town, 1969); *DNB*, entries, Charles Joseph Latrobe and Christian Ignatius Latrobe; Alan Gross, *Charles Joseph La Trobe* (Melbourne, 1956), ch. 1; Jill Eastwood, *Charles Joseph La Trobe* (OUP, Melb., 1972), 1–2, and *ADB*, 2 (Melb., 1967), 89 ff. I am indebted to Dr J. H. de La Trobe, of Hamburg, for the first two references.

Trobe grew up. He was born in London on 30 March 1801, the fifth in a family of four sons and two daughters. We do not know very much of his boyhood (nor of his mother, Anna Syms). Presumably he attended a Moravian school, and he certainly taught at one—the Fairfield Boys Boarding School, in the Manchester suburb of Droyslden. He may have intended to follow his father in the ministry, but in 1824 he left Droyslden to become a tutor in the French-Swiss family of the Count de Pourtalès, at Neuchâtel, in Switzerland, a country where he probably had spent some time at school. Here he became a great ‘hiker’ and mountaineer, an activity he was to demonstrate in his journeys all over his Port Phillip District. He was a pioneer member of the Alpine Club. He wrote two books on his ‘rambles’ in Switzerland and the Tyrol, and later on, two more on North America, which he visited in 1832–33. In the second year he went on a camping tour with Washington Irving, who described him as

... an Englishman by birth, but descended from foreign stock, and who had all the buoyancy and accommodating spirit of a native of the continent. Having rambled over many countries, he had become, to a certain degree, a citizen of the world, easily adapting himself to any change. He was a man of a thousand occupations; a botanist, a geologist, a hunter of beetles and butterflies, a musical amateur, a sketcher of no mean pretensions, in short, a complete virtuoso; added to which he was a very indefatigable, if not always a very successful, sportsman. Never had a man more irons in the fire, and consequently, never was a man more busy or more cheerful.⁵

Back from America, he went to Switzerland again, to marry in 1835 the twenty-five-year-old Sophie de Montmollin, whose country house there was on a hill called ‘Jolimont’ above the lake of Neuchâtel, a place destined to reappear later in the family history. Two years later came his introduction to government work, when he was sent to report on ways of helping the emancipated West Indian slaves adjust to their freedom. He submitted three reports—on Jamaica, the Windward and Leeward Islands, and British Guiana and Trinidad—the last in August 1838.⁶ This was an opportune moment, for the evangelically minded Glenelg was then considering the proposed appointment for Port Phillip, where one of the principal tasks of the new superintendent would be the supervision of the Protectorate system for the ‘protection and civilisation of the Native Tribes’, which had been established in January, following the report

⁵ Quoted, Eastwood, 3. La Trobe’s books are *The Alpenstock or Sketches of Switzerland* (1829), *The Pedestrian; a Summer Ramble in the Tyrol* (1832), *A Rambler in Northern America* (1835) and *A Rambler in Mexico* (1836), a book highly praised by W. H. Prescott in his famous *History of the Conquest of Mexico* (1843).

⁶ Gross, pp. 5–8; *PP*, 1837–8 [vol. XLVIII], nos 113 and 520, and 1839 [vol. XXXIV], no. 35.

of a Select Committee on Aborigines in British settlements the previous year.⁷

But the appointment of a Superintendent did not mean that Port Phillip should be independent of New South Wales, then ruled by Sir George Gipps, who had succeeded as Governor in February 1838. Ten years older than La Trobe, he had served in the Royal Engineers in the Peninsular War, being mentioned in despatches by the Duke of Wellington, and after the defeat of Napoleon, in the army of occupation in France. From 1818 to 1820 he was stationed at Chatham, where he gained some experience of convict labour in the dockyards. He then travelled extensively in Europe and Palestine, but in November 1824 was sent to Berbice, which was later part of the colony of British Guiana. Here, as at Chatham, he showed his administrative capacity, and being involved with the employment of both Negro and Indian labour, submitted valuable reports on the system of slavery and the problems of emancipation. Returning to England in 1829 he was put in charge of the Royal Engineers' department at Sheerness, but took leave to serve on a commission considering boundaries proposed for Irish parliamentary constituencies under the Reform Act of 1832.⁸ In 1834 he was appointed Private Secretary to the First Lord of the Admiralty. In 1835 he was knighted, and then gained further colonial experience as a member of the Royal Commission investigating the grievances of the inhabitants of Lower Canada (Quebec). There and in the reports he displayed liberal views, while showing a wish to maintain Imperial rights, so on his return to England in 1837 he seemed a good candidate for the governorship of New South Wales in October.

So it was an older and much more experienced officer who met La Trobe when he passed through Sydney on his way to his post, and who had to supervise and assist his subordinate for nearly seven years until he retired in July 1846. And it was Gipps, and others in Sydney, who, subject to orders from London, had to determine the policies that La Trobe was to carry out in Port Phillip, for the latter's instructions explicitly stated that the Superintendent would 'stand in the same position in respect to the Governor of New South Wales as that Governor stands to the Secretary of State'.⁹ Though officials were to look to the Superintendent for orders, he could do little without the Governor's authority. He could not exercise the royal prerogative of mercy. He could incur no 'expenditure not provided by the local legislature, or expressly charged on the Land Revenue

⁷ Final Report from the Select Committee on Aborigines (British Settlements), *PP*, 1837 [vol. VII], no. 425; Glenelg to Gipps, 31 January 1838, *HRA*, xix, 252.

⁸ Salt, thesis, pp. 37-62; Gipps to Glenelg, 20 September 1838, *HRA*, xix, 94.

⁹ Instructions to La Trobe, 10 September 1839, enclosed in Gipps to Normanby, 4 November, CO 201/288, f. 19.

and specifically authorised by the Governor'. He could appoint no officer with a salary of more than £100 a year without the Governor's approval. He could not increase the 'establishment'—i.e. the number or rank of his officials. There were a few convicts employed on public works in Port Phillip, but the Superintendent's orders to them could be disallowed by the Governor. The surveyors were under the control of the Surveyor-General in Sydney (and only the Governor could issue orders to him) and the military forces were under the command of the Major-General commanding in Sydney. La Trobe could ask locally for military assistance to preserve the peace, but he was 'to avoid interference in purely military matters', the only exception being that 'military officers holding appointments under the Colonial Government' were responsible to the Superintendent for their 'civil duties'—and that included all officers in the Mounted Police. Though these instructions concluded with the remark that 'His Excellency would always be happy to receive information and suggestions connected with your duties and the welfare of your district', clearly the situation provided plenty of scope for possible dissension, and in his official letter on the separation question La Trobe explains how difficult his situation would have been had he had an unsympathetic superior;¹⁰ fortunately Gipps and La Trobe remained on excellent terms throughout the time they were working together, as this correspondence clearly shows.

From the beginning Gipps declared he would appoint no magistrates in the district without La Trobe's approval, and he was clearly sympathetic with La Trobe in the discussions about the latter's buying land for his residence. But the District's financial dependence on Sydney was a source of trouble—of frequent disappointment to the Superintendent and such a grievance to the settlers that it quickly stimulated them to demand complete political separation. They were convinced that they received an unfairly small share of both the general revenue that was spent on public works and the land revenue which was devoted to immigration—two subjects which often appear in these letters. Gipps frequently found it necessary to stress the need for economy, as was demanded by the Imperial authorities, particularly during the years of financial stringency from 1841 to 1843, and though it is true that during that time the colonial government had no money to spare, the fact that decisions on expenditure and public works were taken in Sydney greatly irked the growing numbers (over 30 000 by 1845) who were living south of the River Murray.

Later, part of the District's difficulties sprang from the attitude of the partly elected Legislative Council, established by the New South

¹⁰ See letter 380, n.2.

Wales Act of 1842. In its opposition to the Governor its majority drastically cut proposed expenditure—particularly on surveying, the Aborigines, and the judicial establishment—and of course the administration in Port Phillip could spend only money voted by the Council, apart from the land revenue, which the Governor controlled and which remained very small after 1841. In this sense, though New South Wales had gained a large measure of financial independence from Downing Street, as far as Port Phillip was concerned it had only exchanged one controller for another, for its six members in the Council were largely powerless in that body—even though it may be said (but would not be admitted by the Port Phillipians) that except in matters in contention with Gipps the Council was not unduly indifferent to the needs of the southern District.

In another important matter in which the New South Wales administration tried to help Port Phillip, it only added to the Superintendent's problems. It was agreed that Melbourne needed local judicial facilities for both civil and criminal cases, so that it would not be necessary for litigants and witnesses to make the long and expensive journey to Sydney for their cases in the Supreme Court to be heard. Bourke had suggested the appointment of an additional judge on the Sydney bench, who could then visit Melbourne to hold regular sessions there, and one such session was proposed at the end of 1840. But the needs of Sydney affected the government's decision. Gipps and the Chief Justice hoped that the quarrels between Mr Justice Willis and his judicial brethren there might be settled by removing Willis from the scene of contention, so he was despatched south to act as a resident judge in Port Phillip. But Sydney's peace meant dissension in Melbourne and Willis' extraordinary bad temper and self-opinionated views brought great trouble to many of the settlers and their superintendent, as many letters here show. Certainly Gipps gave La Trobe every support throughout these controversies, but it was largely because of his own action that they had begun—though one should not overlook the extraordinary decision of the Imperial Government to send Willis to Australia in the first place when his activities and reputation in Upper Canada (Ontario) and British Guiana had clearly shown the behaviour that could be expected from him.

On the land question, Gipps and La Trobe worked well together in dealing with the problems arising from Lord John Russell's determination to sell Crown land at a fixed price instead of by auction and make 'special surveys' for some purchasers, as well as those caused by the squatting system. Here La Trobe appears to have been more sympathetic than his superior to the squatters' demand for

pre-emptive purchasing rights, but he entirely supported Gipps' attempt, in the so-called 'occupation regulations' proposed in April 1844, to make the squatters pay a fair rent (by licence fee and assessment charge) for the enormous runs which they were occupying on Crown land.

The need to care for and protect the Aborigines was another major problem confronting both men, reflecting the policy of the Imperial government and the appointment of the 'Protectors' in 1838.¹¹ In his instructions, La Trobe was directed to pay 'particular attention' to the treatment of the Aborigines and to the activities of the Protectors and the Commissioners of Crown Lands whose responsibility it was to 'prevent collisions' with the settlers and to promote 'the civilisation of the Native Tribes'. Unfortunately the Protectors proved unsatisfactory, though it should be added that the tasks they were asked to perform were impossible, and neither Gipps nor La Trobe had any real solution to offer in dealing with black-white relations which were particularly bad in those years. 'Collisions' between the squatters and the Aborigines seemed never-ending—particularly in the Western District—as the squatters and their flocks were steadily moving in, taking over the native lands and interfering with their food supplies. Both Governor and Superintendent sympathized with the Aborigines, but could see no way to put an end to the struggle between the two groups competing for the use of the land—which indeed could not be done except by limiting white settlement. Without this they could not protect the natives, though unlike the former Lieutenant-Governor of Van Diemen's Land, Sir George Arthur, neither was willing to support the idea of signing a treaty which would recognize that the Aboriginal people had some rights to the land that was being occupied. Of course, such a proposition ran counter to the accepted British policy that Australia was a *terra nullius* and that all its land belonged to the Crown, and as Glenelg had reiterated this doctrine in 1836 when the Imperial government refused to recognize the arrangements made with the local Dutigalla tribe by John Batman and the Port Phillip Association, perhaps it was pointless to put it forward.¹² Certainly Arthur's suggestion, though repeated in relation to Van Diemen's Land, Western Australia, South Australia, Port Phillip and later Canada, was passed over in complete silence by the British government.¹³

These common difficulties and the similar attitude of both parties towards them warmed the relationship between Gipps and La Trobe, a relationship further cemented by their meeting when Gipps visited

¹¹ Glenelg to Gipps, 31 January 1838, *HRA*, xix, 252 ff.

¹² Glenelg to Bourke, 13 April 1836, *HRA*, xviii, 379.

¹³ A. G. L. Shaw, *Sir George Arthur, Bart.*, p. 124 and n.67.

Melbourne in 1841. When the Governor had trouble with his Legislative Council from 1844 onwards, he found the Superintendent a sympathetic confidant, just as he had in 1842 when he was in hot water with Downing Street over the immigration policy which he had pursued the previous year, and as La Trobe in his turn found in his superior amidst his difficulties with Judge Willis.

The correspondence throws much light on the writers' characters as well as on the policies that they were pursuing, though regrettably it is somewhat one-sided, and by far the greater part consists of Gipps' letters to La Trobe. These, which became almost weekly bulletins in the latter part of the period, reveal in the Governor an unsuspected sense of humour as well as testifying to the warm and loyal friendship which existed between the two men. That the letters have survived is obviously the result of La Trobe's habit of keeping all his papers—even to the extent of taking them back to Europe with him—and their preservation by his family. As a result, towards the end of 1933, his granddaughter, Mme la Baronne Elizabeth de Blonay (daughter of La Trobe's eldest daughter Agnes Louisa, the child whose departure in 1844 for Europe (to Neuchâtel), to be educated, caused her parents some distress) was able to offer a large quantity of them to the State Library of Victoria, including two watercolours of Jolimont, the Gipps-La Trobe correspondence and other official and personal documents.

It was decided that the paintings should be added to the Library's Historical Collection and the documents to what was then its Archives branch. Their passage to Melbourne was not uneventful. The paintings had arrived by May 1934, but the valise containing the documents went astray in Paris *en route* to the Agent-General in London. Fortunately it was located in September and reached the Library by the end of the year.

The papers were immediately put to use by Miss Gertrude Morrissey, a graduate of the University of Melbourne who, since 1919, had been working in commercial publicity and in journalism. Using the Gipps-La Trobe correspondence, she prepared eight articles which were published in the Melbourne *Herald* in July 1935, and she was commissioned by the Library, jointly with the Public Library of New South Wales and the Commonwealth National Library, to prepare an index to the papers. This was completed in 1936 and has long been in use as a guide to the correspondence, but is it not fully comprehensive and may now be superseded by that provided in this volume, as far as the letters published here are concerned.

As was said, La Trobe's side of the correspondence is much less complete, for no collection of Gipps' private papers has been found; and Gipps' frequent references to La Trobe's private letters show that

much interesting material has been lost. All that is available for printing are the letters from La Trobe which are in the Dixson Library in Sydney, and some drafts by La Trobe which he had kept with his own papers. For this reason it has been necessary to refer frequently to the official letters from the Superintendent to the Colonial Secretary, which at least have the advantage of having been written by La Trobe himself, unlike the replies which, even if based on Gipps' minutes, were written in the office of the Colonial Secretary, either by Deas Thomson or his Chief Clerk, William Elyard. The result is that the picture of La Trobe which emerges is less informative than that of Gipps, but the collection undoubtedly throws much light on both, and shows far more of the human side of the Governor's character than other available sources have done.¹⁴

Although when Gipps left Sydney he hoped La Trobe would continue to write to him, his death at Canterbury, in the following February, summarily ended the correspondence with just one letter from Gipps written on his arrival in London. La Trobe remained in Melbourne as Superintendent, after a brief posting to Hobart as acting Lieutenant-Governor in 1846-47. He was appointed Lieutenant-Governor of Victoria when the Port Phillip District became a separate colony in 1851, and returned home only in May 1854, after being there nearly fifteen years.

By then his wife Sophie had died, but the following year he married her thirty-four-year-old widowed sister, Rose, who bore him two more daughters. The pair lived in retirement in England, first near Worcester and later at Lewes in Sussex, but they often visited friends and relations elsewhere in England, France and Switzerland. La Trobe, who was made a C.B. in 1858, planned to write a book on the history and geography of Victoria, with his own tours illustrating the latter, emphasizing the geology, botany and zoology of the colony, and describing the Aborigines and the spread of pastoral settlement. His failing eyesight prevented his doing this, though his second daughter, Eleanora, wrote up the manuscript of his tours. What he had been able to do, however was to write to many of the early colonists asking them to tell him of their experiences, and he preserved their replies. These he took away with him, but sent them back to Melbourne in 1872, where, 58 in number, they were published in 1898 by the Trustees of the Public Library as *Letters from Victorian Pioneers*.

After Charles died on 4 December 1875, his widow went back to Neuchâtel, where the family built a memorial chapel to him. It was

¹⁴ Cf. S. C. McCulloch, 'Unguarded Comments on the administration of New South Wales, 1839-46', *Historical Studies*, ix (1959), 30-45.

INTRODUCTION

consecrated in 1878, five years before her own death; nearly a hundred years later, in 1975 the Victorian government was to honour him by placing in it a plaque in the memory of a distinguished public servant.

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