

La Trobeana

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Unravelling La Trobe's *Australian Notes*

In the following essay, Dr Dianne Reilly provides the context for the La Trobe diaries published as *Charles Joseph La Trobe: Australian Notes 1839-1854*, Tarcoola Press in association with the State Library of Victoria, 2006.

The Inter-relationship of La Trobe's Diaries

In the nineteenth century, it was common practice for men and women to document their lives by keeping a diary, a record of the daily happenings in their lives. Charles Joseph La Trobe was no exception. Walking tours in England in the company of friends and his brothers, and every visit he paid to the continent, were described in his journals. His travel diaries resulted in the publication of four books of adventures before he left for Australia.

La Trobe was assiduous in noting every detail of the world around him wherever he travelled, and he continued to record his activities for the next fifteen years. The momentous journey he and his family made from England to Australia on the other side of the world was carefully recorded in his notebooks from the day of his departure from London until he arrived at Port Phillip on 1 October 1839. Nor was the habit of a lifetime broken by the weight of his responsibilities in this often turbulent colony. In his diary, he described his activities in Australia, the places he visited and the people he met until that day, nearly fifteen years later, when his term of office was over and he departed Australian shores forever. With the exception of La Trobe's New South Wales diary, and his account of his first

days at Port Phillip, the journals form part of the 'La Trobe Archive' preserved in the Australian Manuscripts Collection at the State Library of Victoria.

The diaries are transcripts of the various journals still in existence which were kept by La Trobe. The volume which describes his voyage from England to Sydney from 24 March to 24 July 1839 was apparently recorded in an exercise book belonging to his daughter, Agnes Louisa La Trobe, and this is now missing. La Trobe notes as a preface to his New South Wales journal 'For diary of Voyage from England from 24th March to 24th July, see Text Book of ALL 1839'. However, his 'Australian Notes 1839-1854' records rather sketchily some details of this long journey of 123 days on board the *Fergusson*.

La Trobe's **New South Wales diary** of 1839 describes the events from his arrival in Sydney on 25 July when he sent in his credentials to the Governor, Sir George Gipps, until six weeks later when he and his family embarked on the *Pyramus* and sailed for Port Phillip on 17 September. This diary is held by the Archives de l'Etat in Neuchâtel, Switzerland, where much La Trobe memorabilia is housed. A copy of this diary forms part of the 'La Trobe Neuchâtel Archive' held in the Australian Manuscripts Collection of the State Library of Victoria.

The Public Record Office, Victoria is the custodian of La Trobe's first **Port Phillip diary** which documents his first fifty days on duty as Superintendent. This describes his memorable arrival at Liardet's Beach, now Port Melbourne, on 1 October 1839, and the delay caused by 'rough weather' until he and his family could be rowed ashore on

Thursday 3 October for the official welcome from the inhabitants of Melbourne. It goes on to record the daily calls of 'divers gentleman' such as Foster Fyans, Robert Hoddle, William Lonsdale, George Augustus Robinson and the Henty brothers on the new administrator.

La Trobe's shipboard diary of the two weeks spent on board the *Pyramus* en route to Melbourne begins his '**Australia: Memoranda of Journeys, Excursions and Absences, 1839-1854**'. This long narrative was faithfully compiled throughout his time in Australia, and would have formed the basis of his proposed history of the colony of Port Phillip, had not his encroaching blindness prevented its achievement. As a foreword to this volume, added at his residence at Addington Vale in England in August 1856, he noted:

I find that I kept no distinct journals of my various Australian Excursions from my arrival in Port Phillip in 1839, until early in 1845, from which date I have pretty correct diaries.

However, the events described in 'Australia: Memoranda of Journeys, Excursions and Absences, 1839-1854' were amplified in the two volumes of 'Australia Notes, 1839-1854' which 'were copied by E.S.L.T.', Eleanor Sophia La Trobe, Charles Joseph's second daughter, in 1874-1875, not long before his death in 1875. These notes give a reasonably comprehensive and personal account of La Trobe's activities over nearly fifteen years in the colony.

At the same time as he was compiling his private 'Memoranda', La Trobe was maintaining a complete record of his administrative activities in his '**Memoranda of Official Correspondences. Port Phillip, 1839-1851**', which concluded when he was appointed Lieutenant-Governor of Victoria. This describes the contents of all incoming mail, drafts of some proclamations, reports to the Colonial Secretary in Sydney, and summaries of his own official

communications, including the appointment of government officials, during this period. It is occasionally interspersed with personal comments, such as his obvious triumph at having personally blazed a trail to Cape Otway in 1846, and notes about an eclipse of the sun and the 'Black Thursday' bushfire in 1851.

The diaries compiled by La Trobe from 24 March 1839 to 5 May 1854 are produced in sequence in the pages of this book, and appear in print together for the very first time as a record of La Trobe's connection with Australia. Their value lies in the fact that they provide data otherwise unrecorded of the life of this administrator. In addition, they reflect La Trobe's reactions to his posting and to those he met during his nearly fifteen years in Australia, and they reveal something of the man himself, giving candid insights into his attitudes and manner. Above all, they reveal La Trobe's predominant characteristics, instilled in him from his earliest years, which informed his administration of the colony.

Dianne Reilly

NOTE: See also 'Charles Joseph La Trobe: A Chronology', by L.J. Blake and R. Gill, *The Genealogist*, Vol.1, 1975, pp.175-184. <http://www.latrobesociety.org.au/documents/LaTrobeChronology.pdf> (see the link from Publications-Works about La Trobe, Articles)