

LA TROBE, CHARLES JOSEPH (1801-1875)
lieutenant-governor of Victoria

was born in London on 20 March 1801. His father, the Rev. C. I. La Trobe, was a Moravian minister who married a Miss Sims of Yorkshire, and their son was originally educated for the ministry. He, however, did much travelling in Europe, possibly as a tutor, and in 1829 published his first travel book, *The Alpenstock*. This was followed by *The Pedestrian* (1832), *The Rambler in North America* (1835), and *The Rambler in Mexico* (1836). While on the way to America with the young Count de Pourtales, to whom La Trobe appears to have been either a tutor or mentor he met Washington Irving and the three afterwards travelled through America together. La Trobe's account of these travels is mentioned above, Irving's was published under the title *A Tour on the Prairies*. In this book he gives a revealing description of La Trobe: "Another of my fellow-travellers was Mr L.; an Englishman by birth but descended from a 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 every 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". After the conclusion of his American journeys La Trobe was in 1837 sent to the West Indies to report to the British government on the future education of the recently emancipated slaves.

Apparently this report gave satisfaction, and in February 1839 he received the appointment of superintendent of the Port Phillip district. He proceeded to Sydney, arrived on 26 July, and stayed about two months; as he had had no experience of administrative work it was no doubt thought wise to give him some instruction in the procedure to be followed. He arrived at Melbourne on 1 October and received an enthusiastic reception. His salary was £800 a year, but this was soon raised to £1500. He had brought with him a house in sections, which he erected on the 12½ acres of land on the fringe of the city now called Jolimont. He bought this at auction at the upset price of £20 an acre. The residents of Melbourne had agreed among themselves not to bid against the superintendent, and this reaching the ears of Governor Gipps (q.v.) at Sydney he was somewhat disturbed about it. La Trobe, however, was able to convince him that he had acted quite innocently in the matter.

It is a little difficult to realize the primitive state of Melbourne when La Trobe arrived. Streets were marked out but they were quite unmade, and indeed in some cases were little better than bush tracks with stumps of trees in the middle of them. One of his earliest acts was to set some labourers to work improving these conditions. The population was about 3000 and was rapidly growing, there was no drainage, and health conditions were very bad. La Trobe found it necessary to appoint a board of health to inquire into the causes of the heavy mortality of the town, and following that steps were taken to form a municipal corporation. Everything had to be referred to Sydney, where local affairs often appeared to be more pressing. La Trobe himself had comparatively little power, and in spite of his invariable courtesy he was not long in losing his first popularity. But he had really been doing very good work, for finding that his many requisitions were receiving insufficient attention, he had persuaded Gipps to come to Melbourne in October 1841 and form his own opinion of the position. This had had a good effect, but a movement in favour of separation from New South Wales rapidly developed, and finding La Trobe insufficiently sympathetic, the Melbourne city council in 1848 sent a petition to the Queen praying for his removal from his post as superintendent. This was backed up by a resolution carried at a meeting of 3000 persons. The request was refused, and

the colonial office showed its confidence in La Trobe by appointing him lieutenant-governor when separation was at last effected. The influx of population caused by the discovery of gold was the cause of fresh troubles to him, and he had problems of the most difficult character in connexion with the conflicting claims of the squatters and the immigrants. His hesitation concerning the best courses to be followed, led to much abuse of him by the press for which there was little warrant. Early in 1854 the *Argus* began to insert among its advertisements a notice "Wanted a Governor". La Trobe could stand the strain no longer, resigned his position, and left for England in May 1854. He had been administrator of the government for nearly 15 years, and had shared fully in the dissatisfaction which was the common fate of all early governors. Henceforth he lived a retired life in England. Made a C.B. in 1858, he succeeded in 1864 in obtaining a pension of £333 a year from the British government. He soon afterwards became blind and died at Litlington near Eastbourne on 2 December 1875. He was married twice (1) to Sophie de Montmollin who died in 1854 leaving three daughters and a son, and (2) to Rose Isabelle de Meuron, who survived him with two daughters. A granddaughter, La Baronne Godefroy de Blonay, presented a valuable collection of his papers to the public library at Melbourne in 1935.

La Trobe was a thoroughly amiable and kindly man, always courteous and conscientious in carrying out his duties. He was well educated and a capable writer, as his travel books show, and an excellent amateur draughtsman. A volume of scholarly verse, *The Solace of Song*, published anonymously in 1837 and sometimes attributed to him was not, however, his work, having been written by his brother, J. A. La Trobe. His private life was irreproachable, but his administrative work was bitterly criticized during the last few years of his office, and echoes of this will be found in writers on his period up to 30 years after his death. Later historians, however, have been able to realize the extreme difficulty of his position. He could do no more than pass on the sometimes premature demands of the Port Phillip residents, and then carry out his instructions. As a result he too often found himself between the hammer and the anvil. It is possible that he may have deferred too much to Sydney officials, but it is doubtful whether he could have effected much more than he did. He certainly acted with decision in twice preventing the landing of convicts, in 1849 and 1850. Melbourne owes much to him for his part in the founding of the public library, the university, and the Melbourne hospital. He encouraged from the beginning the formation of a reservoir to supply Melbourne with water, and he supported the setting aside of the land for the Botanical, Fitzroy, and other public gardens.

J. H. Heaton, *Australian Dictionary of Dates*; *The Age*, 8 April 1939; *The Argus*, 14 April 1934; A. Sutherland, *Victoria and its Metropolis*; *Historical Records of Australia*, ser. I, vols. XX to XXVI; *Victoria the First Century*; H. G. Turner, *A History of the Colony of Victoria*; G. W. Rusden, *The Discovery Survey and Settlement of Port Phillip*; H. McCrae. *Georgiana's Journal*.

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