

‘TERRE VRAIMENT ÉTRANGE’<sup>1</sup>  
 FRENCH TRAVEL WRITERS ON AUSTRALIAN CITIES  
 BETWEEN THE GOLD RUSH AND FEDERATION

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*C'est un monde de contrastes qui bouleverse les idées des peuples anciens.*<sup>2</sup>

So wrote the French aristocrat, the Comte de Beauvoir, on his last day in Australia on 31 October 1866 after almost four months exploring what he termed ‘une terre vraiment étrange’ (1869, 200). Beauvoir’s journal was a riveting read, describing his journey through cities and countryside in Victoria, New South Wales, Tasmania, Queensland and the Torres Strait Islands as part of a world tour. His journal sold well: at least fifteen versions were published between 1869 and 1886.<sup>3</sup> One of the most surprising contrasts he found was the stark opposition between the unexpectedly modern cities and the rugged landscapes, strange flora and fauna, and ‘exotic’ Aboriginal Australians.

This sense of astonishment at a well-developed settler society permeated a number of travel writings published between the Gold Rush and Federation. During this period (from 1851 to 1901), an unprecedented number of French men and women journeyed to Australia, before publishing their diverse thoughts and reflections.

Some travelled for leisure, as did Beauvoir and Henry Russell-Killough (1864), and Anna Vickers (1883) who used a family holiday to explore Australian botany. Others came because of official missions, such as the Parisian courtesan who became the Melbourne French consul’s wife, Céleste de Chabrilan (1998), or Oscar Comettant (1890), a judge at the 1888 Melbourne Centennial Exhibition. Still others were fortune-seekers, including the gold-miner, café-owner, writer and photographer Antoine Fauchery (1862). The reasons for travel to Australia thus varied greatly. Australia frequently featured as part and parcel of a world, or at least regional, tour, although occasionally, as in the case of Comettant, it provided the sole destination. While the writings covered a broad range of topics, from

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<sup>1</sup> A really strange land.

<sup>2</sup> It is a world of contrasts which subverts the ideas of ancient nations. (All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are by the author.) Beauvoir 1869, 352.

<sup>3</sup> The Bibliothèque Nationale de France lists fifteen editions in its catalogue.

Aboriginal Australians to flora and fauna to gold mining and sheep farming, the cities seem to have been the cause of most surprise because of their commonality with those at home. Australian settler society, particularly in the new and emerging cities, was seen by the French travellers as a paradoxical amalgamation of many European elements and yet at the same time something new and unique.

Curiously, this interesting cache of writings has barely been investigated in depth. Some research has been done on individual writers and writings, frequently by their English translators, and this work provides helpful contextual information (Clancy 1998 and Hone 2015 on Céleste de Chabrillan, Ramsland 2010 on Beauvoir, O'Neill 2015, Reilly 1984 and 1986 on Fauchery, Davison 1985 on Comettant). Several journal articles written on the French in Australia more generally at this time mention the travel writers (Barko 2000 and 2003, Davidson 1985, Nettelbeck 1995). In particular, Colin Thornton-Smith's article (1985) on French perceptions of Victoria lists all relevant publications between 1852 and 1902, including some of these writings. Considering these as a corpus, however, allows for the possibility of exploring common themes that emerge in the French representations of Australia at the time (Donohoo 2012). The period chosen from the Gold Rush to Federation is of interest, partly due to the concentration of works reflecting the popularity of travel writing at the time. Moreover, French-Australian history in the latter half of the nineteenth century has not been as extensively studied as the early French explorers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, or French-Australian relations and French culture in Australia in the twentieth.

Travel writing was at its most influential during the nineteenth century, according to Roy Bridges (2002). It was not, however, innocent, as it was deeply associated with the imperial impulses of European nations. Mary Louise Pratt's work on the connection between European imperialism and travel is seminal. Asking 'How has travel and exploration writing *produced* "the rest of the world" for European readership?' and 'How has it produced Europe's differentiated conceptions of itself in relation to something it became possible to call "the rest of the world"?', she effectively links the concept of 'the Other' to travel writing (1992, 5). In this context, the surprise of finding

Australian cities which were modern undercut the travellers’ expectation of differentiation from Europe.<sup>4</sup>

As the colonial capitals grew in size and sophistication over the fifty year period, French travel writers increasingly took note. The similarity of these cities to metropolises of Europe and England was unexpected. The writers conveyed these in four main areas: descriptions of the built environment, particularly in Sydney and Melbourne, deliberate comparisons and references to the old world, varying opinions on the significance of the convict heritage and the development of ideas of Australia as the working man’s paradise.

### The Built Environment

Rien dans l’ensemble ni dans les détails ne venait justifier l’idée que je m’étais faite de Melbourne. Là où je m’attendais à rencontrer des maisons en bois, des huttes même, érigées à la hâte et éparpillées sous les arbres, j’ai trouvé des maisons en brique à un ou deux étages, solidement construites, alignées au cordeau, formant des rues d’un kilomètre de long, très droites, très larges, parfaitement macadamisées, et dans ces rues des habits noirs, des faux-cols, des

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<sup>4</sup> Works of some other French travel writers during this period (which have not been included in the present study because of their limited coverage of Australian cities) are as follows:

Colin Dyer, ed., *A Frenchman’s Walk Across the Nullarbor: Henry Gilbert’s Diary, Perth to Brisbane 1897–1899*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press;

Octave Chemin, *De Paris aux mines d’or de l’Australie occidentale*, Paris, Gauthier-Villars, 1900;

Alexandre Dumas, *Impressions de voyage : Madame Giovanni en Australie, aux Iles Marquises, à Taïti, à la Nouvelle Calédonie, en Californie et au Mexique*, Paris, Impr. de Voisvenel, 1855;

Ernest Michel, *A travers l’hémisphère sud II: Équateur, Panama, Antilles, Mexique, Îles Sandwich, Nouvelle-Zélande, Tasmanie, Australie*, Limoges, Marc Barbou et Cie, 1888;

Ernest Michel, *A travers l’hémisphère sud ou Mon second voyage autour du Monde III : Nouvelle-Galles du Sud, Queensland, Nouvelle-Calédonie, Australie du Sud, Île Maurice, Île de la Réunion, Les Seychelles, Aden, Palestine, Égypte*, Paris, Victor Palmé, 1890.

robes de soie, des bottines à talons, de tout, comme en Europe, de tout, jusqu'à des orgues de Barbarie.<sup>5</sup>

Arriving in Melbourne in 1852, towards the beginning of the Gold Rushes, Antoine Fauchery was astounded by Melbourne's urban development. Nothing was as he expected; his preconceived idea of a rustic town was proven false. In its place, he found a well-built and well-planned city filled with signs of civilisation and bourgeois culture. It was as if he were still in Europe.

The highly developed nature of the cities, particularly Sydney and Melbourne, greatly surprised other French visitors. The Comte de Beauvoir was immediately stunned upon disembarkation at Port Phillip, 'à quel point la civilisation y est avancée' ('to what extent civilisation here is advanced') (1869, 31). A few days later, as he discovered more of the city, he drew a more explicit contrast between his preconception and reality: 'Cette Australie qu'on croit chez nous, et que je croyais un peu moi-même, si perdue et si sauvage, possède tous les luxes de l'Europe' ('This Australia that we at home imagine, and that I myself had even imagined a little, as so lost and so wild, possesses all the luxuries of Europe') (41). While Melbourne astounded other writers, Adelaide was Anna Vickers' greatest surprise. She foresaw a bright future for this city: 'Adélaïde deviendra peut-être une des plus grandes villes du monde ... Il n'y aurait rien d'étonnant à cela, les progrès étant si rapides dans ces colonies !' ('Adelaide might perhaps become one of the biggest cities in the world... there would be nothing surprising in this, progress being so fast in these colonies!') (1883, 156).

The perception of rapid progress was rendered explicit when considering the cities' monuments. For example, Beauvoir wrote of Sydney:

Quel contraste entre cette ville de plus de cent mille habitants, avec des théâtres, des bibliothèques, des rues animées, dont quelques-

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<sup>5</sup> Nothing on the whole nor in the details justified the idea that I had of Melbourne. Where I expected to find wooden houses, even huts, hastily erected and scattered under the trees, I found brick houses with one or two storeys, solidly built, perfectly aligned, forming streets a kilometre long, very straight, very wide, perfectly macadamised; and in these streets, black clothes, collars, silk dresses, heeled boots, everything as in Europe, everything up to barrel organs. Fauchery 1862, 60–61.

unes, Pitt street et George street, sont ornées de boutiques d’un bout à l’autre et sillonnées sans cesse par des voitures de luxe et des omnibus, quel contraste entre tous les effets brillants d’une civilisation étonnante et l’aspect sauvage de Botany-Bay, où débarquèrent les fondateurs de Sydney !<sup>6</sup>

Here, the repetition of ‘quel contraste’ reinforces the stark differences between the modern, bustling and even luxurious city and the wildness of the pre-European landscape. Almost all the different writers gave detailed descriptions of the buildings and monuments of the cities. Oscar Comettant’s picture of Melbourne, for example, is quite typical. He remarked upon the beginnings of the CBD with multi-level offices (‘avec ascenseur, bien entendu!’) (‘with lifts, of course!’); the banks (‘parmi les plus beaux *buildings*’)<sup>7</sup>; the new Parliament (‘le plus vaste et le plus beau monument ... d’un aspect grandiose’<sup>8</sup>—this most likely refers to the colonnade and portico built during the 1880s and finished in 1888, the year of Comettant’s voyage); the Legislative Assembly and Senate, describing the former as ‘le Palais législatif’ (‘the Legislative Palace’), no doubt reminding him of the Palais Bourbon; the Treasury, ‘dans le style italien... un monument remarquable’ (‘in the Italianate style... a remarkable monument’); the General Post Office, ‘un peu sombre’ (‘somewhat dark’); the Town Hall (‘un édifice d’ordre supérieur’<sup>9</sup>); the law courts; the library; Government House; the University; the Observatory; theatres; the Museum; Customs House (all of which he lists without giving much detail); and numerous churches with high steeples, ‘afin de rappeler aux justes que là est l’espérance’ (‘so as to remind the righteous that hope is found there’) (Comettant 1890, 44–45). Photographs of Melbourne’s

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<sup>6</sup> What a contrast between this city of more than a hundred thousand residents, with theatres, libraries, busy streets, some of which, Pitt Street and George Street, are adorned with shops from one end to the other, and constantly travelled by luxury carriages and omnibuses; what a contrast between all these brilliant effects of an astonishing civilisation, and the wildness of Botany Bay, where the founders of Sydney first landed. (Beauvoir 1869, 272).

<sup>7</sup> Amongst the most beautiful buildings.

<sup>8</sup> The largest and the most beautiful monument ... of grandiose appearance.

<sup>9</sup> A building of superior order.

streetscapes and monumental buildings were captured by Antoine Fauchery (see Figure 1 below), while Anna Vickers took comparative photographs of various cities (such as Sydney in Figure 2, page 9).



**Figure 1– Bourke Street, Melbourne –Fauchery, *Sun Pictures of Victoria*, p. 28.**

The built environment was inextricably linked to social behaviour. This appears most explicit in the descriptions of ‘Doing the Block’ on Collins Street between Swanston and Elizabeth Streets. As Graeme Davison recounts, this was where ‘fashionable Melbourne showed off its finery, greeted its friends and “cut” its enemies’ (2004, 286). Vickers distinguished between the pretext of doing errands and the reality of meeting friends and hearing the latest gossip: ‘se mettre au courant de tous les nouveaux cancans de la ville’ (‘to get up to date with all the recent gossip of the city’) (1883, 109). She paralleled the elegance of the shopfronts with young ladies in their latest finery (109).

Writing at a later period, Comettant was able to provide insight into suburbia. He visited fellow Frenchman George Burk, who lived in North Brighton, which was twenty minutes by train from Melbourne. Yet his first visit was quite confusing as the streets were not marked. This gave rise to a rather amusing anecdote where, one of the few times he used the second person pronoun, he invited readers to imagine themselves an Australian



newly arrived in Paris and invited to dinner at ‘*Belle-Maman, Nanterre*’.<sup>10</sup> ‘Vous demandez, en descendant, à la gare, “Belle-Maman” — connais pas, vous répond-on. Vous cherchez, vous fouillez les chemins... “Belle-



Figure 2 – Panorama of Sydney–Vickers, *Voyage en Australie et en Nouvelle Zélande*, p. 49.

Maman” semble fuir à votre approche’.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, he suggested that Australians should have a better way to indicate ‘country houses’ (64). On a brief trip to Sydney, Comettant also remarked on the growing suburban lifestyle: ‘où logent les familles de ceux qui, dans la ville, dirigent des établissements commerciaux. L’heure des affaires passée, ils vont rejoindre les leurs dans cette demi-campagne des alentours de Sydney’.<sup>12</sup> This portrayal of suburbia as an escape from the city reflected the Australian desire for

<sup>10</sup> Familiar form of *belle-mère*, mother-in-law. In this instance it is supposed to be the name of a property in the outer suburbs.

<sup>11</sup> You ask as you get off at the station, “Belle-Maman”. “Don’t know it,” they respond. You search, you scour the streets... “Belle-Maman” seems to flee at your approach. (1890, 63).

<sup>12</sup> Where the families of those who lead the businesses in the city live. The working day finished, they join their families in this semi-countryside surrounding Sydney. (368).

bringing together the ‘advantages of country and city life combined’ (Davison 2004, 167).

Nevertheless, the colonial city, specifically Melbourne, did not enjoy a unanimously positive representation. However,, as the city developed, its description by the travel writers became more positive. Fauchery provides a nuanced depiction of the city, recognising both its surprising elements of development, as already mentioned, and its shabbier side. He describes the temporary tent city of ‘Canvas-Town’ (on the southern side of the Yarra, for the poorest of the newly arrived migrants) in sombre terms: ‘cité flottante que le soleil dévore, que la pluie traverse et que le vent emporte dans ses jours de mauvaise humeur !’ (‘floating city that the sun devours, that the rain penetrates and that the wind blows away on its bad mood days!’) (1862, 68–69. See also Macintyre 1997, 77). Céleste de Chabrillan was even more negative, describing streets littered with old shoes, clothes and broken pottery (1877, 89). She used the dual metaphors of a fairground and a market to describe the chaos, both in terms of society and even the built environment—which apparently consisted at this time (1854) of only a few brick houses along with huts and tents (89). Moreover, her portrayal of the society is damning, claiming the area in St Kilda where she lived was a ‘favoured haunt for criminals’ and as such she had ‘unconquerable fears’ (91). While indeed there is truth to her comments, which are corroborated to a certain degree by Fauchery’s, they cannot be taken at mere face value. Céleste de Chabrillan was rejected by Melbourne society for being a former courtesan, and felt the pain of being deliberately prevented from accompanying her husband to parties (84–86, 102, 113–114, 132). Thus, her highly negative portrayal of Melbourne represented her revenge on the city that had rejected her. Her travel writing, *Un Deuil au bout du monde* (*Mourning at the end of the World*), was not the only form of revenge-seeking. Her Australian-inspired novel *Les Voleurs d’or* (*The Gold Robbers*) repeated this: ‘At that period Melbourne was not yet a city. It was an *entrepôt* (warehouse). Everywhere shops and stores. No repose, no sociality [sic]. Something forced and brutal, like the first efforts of society in its rudimentary stage.’<sup>13</sup> This series of short sentences reinforces her sense of shock at the city that scorned her.

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<sup>13</sup> Céleste de Chabrillan, 1857, *Les voleurs d’or*, Paris, Michel Lévy Frères. Quoted in Victorian Artists’ Society, 1984, p. 12.



A geographic difference also exists in the description of different cities, with a conscious comparison frequently emerging between Melbourne and Sydney. Melbourne’s planned aspect, and particularly its well laid-out streets, was praised in direct contrast to Sydney’s more sprawling layout (see for example Vickers 1883, 110 or Comettant 1890, 368). Yet this did not deter the French visitors from enjoying Sydney. For example, Comettant wrote, ‘Melbourne est plus grandiose que Sydney, mais Sydney a peut-être quelque chose de plus intime, de plus empreint du caractère créole, c’est-à-dire de plus séduisant’ (‘Melbourne is more grandiose than Sydney, but Sydney has perhaps something more intimate, more marked by a creole character, that is to say, more seductive’) (1890, 368–369). The reference to creoleness links Sydney, as a white settler colonial society, to the vast array of Creole societies from the West Indies to Martinique to coastal West Africa that were ‘surviving or thriving in nearly unlivable surroundings’ (Dominguez 1986, 13). This emphasises the exotic nature of a culture that has assimilated indigenous elements, which Comettant saw as more organic in Sydney than in Melbourne. Henry Russell-Killough, for his part, was unable to explain exactly why he enjoyed Sydney so much, but claimed it was his favourite city not only in Australia but in all his world travels: ‘la ville où je me suis trouvé le plus heureux’ (‘the city where I found myself the happiest’) (1864, 389–390).

### Comparisons with the Old World

In trying to best capture and describe the colonial cities, the French writers frequently appealed to comparisons with the old world. Yet the side-by-side European and English comparisons are unexpected. The rise of postcolonial history in the 2000s led to numerous studies of Britishness in Australia, which suggested that emulating British culture embodied a conscious reflection of belonging to the Empire (see for example Davidson 2004; Meaney 2001; Darian-Smith 2007). Yet from their position as outsiders, these French travel writers provide a nuanced counter-balance to recognise the elements of Australia modelling continental as well as British influences. As Davison argues, ‘the antithesis between Anglo-Saxon and continental models of urban development had been there almost from the beginning’ (Davison 2004, 779). For example, the 1850s pamphlet *Melbourne as it is, and as it ought*

*to be* proposed that Mediterranean town planning of squares, arcades and colonnades was more suitable in the Australian climate than the British and American grid layout (Davison 2001, 780).

Beauvoir's initial impression upon landing in Melbourne, the first place in Australia he visited, was its striking resemblance to England:

Il me semble que la couleur locale de ce pays-ci consiste précisément à n'être pas couleur locale, et que la colonie... ressemble d'une façon inouïe à la métropole... Tout ce qu'il y a d'étonnant dans cette fidèle reproduction de l'ancien monde sur une terre inconnue il y a deux cents ans, vierge encore il y a trente-trois ans !<sup>14</sup>

The surprise of a reproduction of the home country in the colony is exemplified by the rapidity of the city's expansion. Yet only a few days later, Beauvoir compares Melbourne to Europe (1869, 83–84). Similarly, Sydney reminded Beauvoir of Europe, and specifically of his social life in Paris, whilst also resembling England (though he does not specify how exactly) (270, 301–302). Evidently, he did not see any contradiction in comparing the same city to two different models of urban planning despite the great differences between Paris and London. Comettant specified clearly which elements reminded him of which country: for him, Melbourne was 'essentiellement anglaise par ses mœurs, ses habitants et ses constructions' ('essentially English by its manners, its residents and its buildings'), while its grid pattern layout was 'yankee fashion' (1890, 61). Sydney, by contrast, was in his eyes more European than British in its design, despite its heritage: 'j'aurais pu me croire en Europe, en pays anglais dans la ville mère de l'Australie' ('I could have thought myself in Europe, in this English country, in the founding city of Australia') (368). Russell-Killough similarly aligned Melbourne with London and Sydney with Paris, although without giving specific reasons for the comparisons (1864, 333).

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<sup>14</sup> It seems to me that the local colour of this country is precisely to not have a local colour, and that the colony ... resembles the home country in an unprecedented way... This faithful reproduction of the old world in a land that was unknown two hundred years ago, and untouched only thirty-three years ago is so surprising! (Beauvoir 1869, 34–35).

Comparing Australian cities to their old world equivalents gave rise to expressions of homesickness. Vickers, for example, was disconcerted by a Christmas without snow in the middle of summer. She described herself as feeling disoriented (*‘dépaysé’*) and estranged (*‘l’éloignement se fait sentir avec plus de force’*) (*‘remoteness makes itself felt more strongly’*) (1883, 57). Vickers visited the home of a French woman living in Australia, Madame T, who claimed to have become completely Australian in her heart and soul. When Vickers and her family started talking about *galettes* and *brioches*, Madame T burst into tears, leading Vickers to reflect that while she may well have become Australian in heart and soul, she remained decidedly French in her stomach! (134) Chabrilan similarly wept at the thought of France, when hosting a fundraiser ball for the French wounded in Crimea, where French national songs were played. Claiming to be deeply disturbed, she concluded, *‘There is no getting away from it: I’m a Parisian to the core!’* (1877, 139–140). Yet homesickness was not restricted to the women. Beauvoir found spending Sundays in a British city such as Melbourne sad and bleak as opposed to happy Sundays home in France (1869, 94). Comettant deliberately chose to stay at the French Club in Melbourne so that he could live amongst compatriots: *‘J’ai vécu en Australie presque comme si je n’étais pas sorti de France’* (*‘I lived in Australia almost as if I had not left France’*) (1890, 55). These experiences of homesickness indicate that there was a sharp awareness of the differences between Australia and the old world, despite the many similarities in society and urban planning, perspectives expressed in defence of the superiority of France.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognise the extent to which French urban development shaped the thoughts of the travel writers during their time in Australia. During the second half of the nineteenth century, Paris was rebuilt. This was largely the work of Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann, Prefect of the Seine during the reign of Napoleon III. Works of modernisation, especially in public hygiene, were significant; however, the most important contribution was the creation of a uniform look to the city with *‘striking regularity’* and *‘obsessively straight’* wide boulevards (Jordan 2004, 89). While all major European cities were modernised during the nineteenth century, the fame of Haussmann’s work lies both in its immensity and the rapidity of its achievement (Marchand 1993, 92). Nevertheless, he was heavily criticised for the *“vandalisme”* avec lequel il jeta à terre le vieux Paris (*‘the “vandalism” with which he destroyed old Paris’*) (Marchand

1993, 97). Rather comically, in 1892, the term *haussmanniser* was coined to define urban renewal by demolition (Jordan 2004, 88). Beauvoir reflected this attitude, suggesting that as everything in Melbourne was new, Haussmann would be bored since there was nothing to destroy (1869, 83–84)! The interest in Australian urban planning by the French travellers, therefore, reflects the historical context in which their own capital was being radically transformed.

## The Convict Heritage

One of the aspects of settler society, including that of the cities, which weighed heavily on the consciences of the French travel writers, was the convict heritage. At the same time as Britain was moving away from the convict system, France moved towards it. Transportation to the east coast of Australia ended in 1852, the same year in which a disastrous French experiment of transportation to French Guiana began (Forster 1996, 1). Similarly, transportation to Australia ended entirely in 1868, with Western Australia the last destination for British criminals.<sup>15</sup> Four years before, France had established a penal colony in New Caledonia (Forster 1991, 135).

This decision had a long history, as the political instability of France in the first half of the nineteenth century meant that debates on crime and punishment were revisited many times during this period (Forster 1991). In 1819, a government committee decided that a penal colony was desirable, and suggested the southwest corner of Australia was the most suitable location; however, this decision was not acted upon (Forster 1991, 138). A fierce debate erupted in the *Chambre des Députés* in 1831, proposing to remove from the penal code the deportation of political prisoners, which resulted in an amendment supporting the sentence of deportation (Forster 1996, 55–67). Yet it was not until the Second Empire that transportation was put into place, with 15,000 political prisoners sent to Algeria after the June 1848 insurrection (Forster 1991, 146). Throughout the French decision-making process on penal policy, Australia was an important test case of the possibilities of criminals forming the basis of a successful colony (Forster 1996, 1–2). Interestingly, French politicians, both those in favour of and those opposed to transportation, used Botany Bay to support their arguments (Forster 1996, 7–54). For example, the 1831 debate centred on the success

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<sup>15</sup> Transportation to Tasmania was abolished in 1853.

of the British colony, with the chairman of the judicial committee in the *Chambre des Députés* who presented the bill remarking that ‘On all sides the example of Botany-Bay is cited.’<sup>16</sup> The contentious issue of transportation continued until its cessation in New Caledonia in 1896 and French Guiana in 1938 (Forster 1996, 175).

It is therefore unsurprising that the French travel writers visiting Australia participated in this debate by commenting on their impressions: first of the reality of the convict system and later on its legacy. Although opinions varied, following the greater divergence of views in Paris, a general trend can be observed in the development of the French representation of ‘convictism.’ During the era of transportation the dangers of convictism appeared all too real. Yet, as the risk was removed with the cessation of transportation to Australia, the writers proved eager to assure their readers back in France that European perceptions of convicts running wild were not accurate.

Fauchery wrote contemporaneously of transportation, and was highly critical of its cruelties. He quoted extensively from the letter of an ex-convict, who reported the apparent deaths by starvation of 13,000 convicts in six months, and 800 in the following five months, taking at face value presumably inflated statistics (1862, 106). He also related the rather gruesome death of a convict buried alive, repeated deaths by flogging with up to 800 lashes, and a pregnant female convict who was killed by being plunged multiple times into the river from the top of a ship’s deck (106–109). Fauchery’s condemnatory stance on convictism in Australia was presumably influenced by his politically liberal stance, grounded in his social background in Bohemian Paris circles (Reilly 1984, 4). As his friend the poet and writer Théodore de Banville recounted in the introduction to *Lettres d’un mineur en Australie*, Fauchery had set off only a few years earlier in 1848 to ‘liberate’ Poland from Russian control, before running out of funds and being interned in a camp, then repatriated to Paris.<sup>17</sup> This quirky episode was part of a movement in 1848–1849 of Polish patriots ‘galvanised into action by the revolutionary wave that seemed to herald the collapse of absolutism in Prussia and Austria’: in Paris, for example, on 15 May 1848, thousands of workers invaded the National Assembly crying ‘Vive la Pologne!’ (Lubowski

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<sup>16</sup> *Archives parlementaires, Chambre de Députés*, 11 November 1831, 482, quoted in Forster 1991, 141.

<sup>17</sup> Théodore de Banville, ‘Lettre’, in Fauchery 1862, xix–xv. Also see Reilly, 1984, 4.

2006, 170–171). Fauchery's involvement with this movement is an indication of his radical political ideology, which influenced his critique of the convict system.

There occurred a marked change in representations of the convict system after its abolition. Comettant noted after his 1888 visit that 'Sydney s'est lavée depuis longtemps de la tache originelle des convicts' ('Sydney has long ago washed itself of the original stain of its convicts') (1890, 368–369). Yet it became a serious pre-occupation for Beauvoir to exonerate the stain that convictism had left on Australia in the European imagination. In one of his first diary entries, on 12 July, he remarked:

Aux yeux de bien des gens en Europe, l'Australie n'est encore qu'une colonie pénitentiaire du Royaume-Uni et un refuge d'aventuriers chercheurs d'or. On se figure sans doute que nous y coudoyons à chaque pas, que nous y avons pour commensaux des convicts, des assassins ayant tué père et mère... Mais c'est là une erreur bien grande, et tel n'est point l'état des choses.<sup>18</sup>

He noted that no convicts were ever sent to Melbourne, and that it was unjust to stain all Australian colonies with the same heritage of convictism. As he visited other cities, his ideas became even more fervently defensive in explaining the erosion of convictism. When in Tasmania, he briefly discussed the history of convictism but concentrated disproportionately on the history of the free settler immigrants. He implicitly compared Tasmania to the United States (where 50,000 convicts were sent between 1718 and 1775) in recounting the victory over transportation: 'C'était la seconde fois qu'une société nuisible s'effaçait' ('This was the second time that a harmful society faded') (1869, 251; see also Morgan 1989, 30).

Finally, when in Sydney, Beauvoir's indignation at the misrepresentations of colonial society reached a pinnacle. He remarked: 'la pauvreté et la condition impure des premiers pionniers ont été noyées et

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<sup>18</sup> In the eyes of many people in Europe, Australia is still only a penal colony of the United Kingdom, and a refuge for adventurous gold miners. One imagines no doubt that at every step we rub shoulders with and eat alongside convicts, assassins who have murdered father and mother... But this is a very big mistake, and it is not the state of things. (Beauvoir 1869, 53–54).



refoulées dans l’abîme par le flot régulier et envahisseur d’une immigration pure, laborieuse et honnête’.<sup>19</sup> The strength of the verbs ‘noyées’ and ‘refoulées’, and the vivid imagery they conjure, is matched by the moralistic descriptors of the free-settler immigrants, continuing his dualistic conservatism. So great was his sentiment on this matter that it served as one of the motivating factors for publishing his travel writings.

Si le bonheur veut que je revienne en Europe, une chose avant tout me sera bien vivement à cœur : ce sera de contribuer à laver la Nouvelle-Galles du Sud de la tache que lui a infligée en Europe son origine impure.<sup>20</sup>

Je ne serai heureux que si j’ai pu remplir mon devoir, et rendre hommage à la société de Sydney qu’on ne connaît pas, et pour laquelle on est, chez nous, injuste sans le vouloir.<sup>21</sup>

The priority he accorded to what he perceived as his duty above all other things is remarkable. Beauvoir’s use of the language of stain echoed the same metaphor employed by Australian colonists to describe the convict heritage.<sup>22</sup> This suggests that he was deeply influenced by the people he encountered, and that his motivation probably grew out of conversations with Sydneysiders.

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<sup>19</sup> Poverty and the impure condition of the first pioneers have been drowned and repressed in the abyss by the steady and invasive flow of a pure, hard-working and honest migration (53–54).

<sup>20</sup> If I may have the happiness to return to Europe, one thing above all will be close to my heart: it will be to contribute to washing New South Wales of the stain that its impure origins have inflicted on it in Europe (Beauvoir 1869, 276).

<sup>21</sup> I will only be happy if I can fulfil my duty, and pay tribute to the society of Sydney that we do not know, and to which we are unintentionally unfair at home. (Beauvoir 1869, 280).

<sup>22</sup> The convict ‘stain’ is further discussed in these sources: Reynolds 1969; Smith 2008 and Alexander 2010.

## A Worker's Paradise

The fourth and final element of city lifestyle that interested the French travel writers was the socio-political reform adopted by parliamentary democracy, and workers' rights. This emerged most evidently in the writings of Beauvoir and Comettant; while other travellers mentioned Parliaments, and even in the case of Vickers attended one parliamentary sitting (1883, 113), they do not make political assessments of the same profundity from their experiences. There are two likely reasons why Beauvoir and Comettant could develop more in-depth analyses. Firstly, both had access, whether from aristocratic status in the case of the former, or an official mandate for the visit in the case of the latter, to leading government officials and local dignitaries. Secondly, they were writing after the development of both the colonial parliamentary systems and the rights obtained by workers. By contrast, Fauchery and Céleste de **Cabrillan** visited prior to the obtaining of responsible government in New South Wales and the first elections in Victoria, both of which occurred in 1856 (*History* 2009).

Despite the loss of his aristocratic privileges as a result of revolution in France, Beauvoir complimented the 'pure democracy put to work' and the 'school of political life open to all' in Victoria.<sup>23</sup> He found the colonists' liberty in self-government and particularly their achievement in writing their own constitution highly appealing (1869, 138). Moreover, he praised Victoria for establishing equality between different religious denominations so that, unlike in England, the Anglican Church did not enjoy any special privileges, thus resolving what he saw as one of the greatest problems in the United Kingdom through freedom of religion (220–221). Beauvoir found the style of colonial government both effective and attractive: 'Elle a créé non plus une colonie mais un monde nouveau' ('It has created not a colony but a new world') (147). This reflection on the Victorian political system led him to interject and offer political commentary on France's most valuable colony: 'et dire qu'après de si beaux résultats, qui ne sont certes pas ignorés en Europe, on refuse encore des députés à l'Algérie française !' ('and to think that after such good results, which are certainly not unknown in Europe, we still deny French Algeria parliamentary representation') (150). This reflects

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<sup>23</sup> 'La pure démocratie mise à l'œuvre, l'école de la vie politique ouverte à tous.' (Beauvoir 1869, 147.)

the contextual difference between British settler colonies which granted progressive self-government to the white migrant population, and the French model of colonialism in Algeria which was seen as an extension of mainland France but had less political autonomy.

Beauvoir also mentioned the excellent workers’ conditions in the Australian colonies. He was impressed upon visiting the State Library of Victoria to find 400 working-class men studying there. Not only was he surprised by these men’s desire to be educated, but also by the fact that they had time for such an activity: he soon discovered the Australian institution of the eight-hour day (42–43). Yet it was Comettant who wrote most extensively on workers’ rights. He remarked that, due to a labour shortage in the 1880s, workers were well paid as they were able to dictate terms to the employers rather than vice versa (1890, 166). He then noted the low cost of living, which enabled workers to save enough to purchase their own house and anticipate an independent retirement (167–169). With strong unions blocking foreign workers, they were able to maintain their comfortable standard of living (170–173). Comettant thus concluded: ‘Les ouvriers y sont... incontestablement heureux’ (‘Workers here are ... undeniably happy’) (166). His reflections echoed the popular view which since the 1850s had seen Australia as the ‘working man’s paradise’.

Neither Beauvoir nor Comettant appear to be socialist: they do not align themselves with any of the disparate strands of socialism dominant in France at the time, utopianism, Marxism, or anarchism; nor do they mention contemporary French socialists, such as Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, Louis Blanc, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon or Jules Guesde (Brunet 1869, 5–26; Judt 1986, 24–114). They do, however, prefigure the French idea at the beginning of the twentieth century of Australia as a working model of socialism in action. This stems from Albert Métin’s book *Le Socialisme sans doctrines*, first published in 1901. Although not travel writing per se, this political treatise originated in a five-month research tour of Australia and New Zealand in 1899. Métin would later become a *député* (parliamentarian) from 1909 to 1918, representing various radical parties (Albert 2012). Russel Ward, who translated his work into English, suggests Métin was a utopian socialist who believed piecemeal reform would lead to a future socialist society, and as such sought to stress the success of practical Australasian reformism rather than Continental intellectualism (1977, 2).

Métin studied numerous aspects of Australian working life, including trade unionism, working hours, legal protection of workers, arbitration, the minimum wage, unemployment assistance, the old-age pension and the idea of the worker's paradise. He claimed that Australia was the closest of any British territory in realising the rallying cry of English workers for '*Eight Hours to Work, Eight Hours to Play, Eight Hours to Sleep, Eight Shillings a Day*' (1910, 146).<sup>24</sup> Moreover, he reported favourably that the colonies enjoyed more public services than European countries and spent more money proportionally on education and public works (233–234). The pinnacle, in his opinion, was old-age pension, which had been established since 1899 in New Zealand and which Australia was at the time in the process of adopting. He described this initiative as moving beyond expediency and entering into truly socialist tendencies (252). Yet his disappointment is palpable when he assesses that socialism has not 'seduced' Australians, and that it had a pejorative meaning even amongst the leaders of the trade unions (115). In his conclusion, Métin imagines that Australian politics could become socialist; consequently, his pleasure when writing the preface to the second edition in 1910 is palpable as he concludes that 'l'évolution se fait en ce moment vers le socialisme d'État' ('at the moment, evolution is towards state socialism') (viii). Unfortunately, Métin had an idealised view of the reality of the working-class experience in Australia, unaware of some of the darker aspects. For example, the first big industrial dispute in Australia, the 1891 Shearers' Strike in Queensland, was ended by colonial mounted troops arresting the unionists involved for conspiracy and sedition, thirteen of whom were sentenced to three years imprisonment (Svensen 1989; see also Horne 1971).

## Conclusion

To sum up, French travellers between the Gold Rush and Federation were surprised by the developed nature of Australian cities. The cities were remarkable for their familiarity in this far-flung place. The built environment echoed simultaneously British and European town planning models. Looming large in the French imagination of Australia was the practice and legacy of convictism. Yet once the travellers' investigations had overcome this stain, the success of social and political reforms in Australia challenged and

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<sup>24</sup> Quoted in English in the original.

surpassed the French model. These travel writings provide a useful insight for understanding urban development in colonial Australia, particularly as their position as outsiders enabled the travel writers to recognise non-British sources. Additionally, the level of surprise draws attention to and stands in stark contrast with the expectations of an exotic, and indeed perhaps backward, place. This reveals something of contemporary assumptions in France about the anticipated otherness of far-off lands. The travellers perceived Australia as a land of paradoxes, anticipating its strange flora and fauna and first Australians, but being confounded by the surprising modernity; an unexpected sense of contradiction in two ‘Australias’. For the French travel writers who visited Australia between the Gold Rush and Federation, Australia really was ‘une terre vraiment étrange’ (a really strange land).<sup>25</sup>

Sydney

### Appendix: Who’s Who

#### Céleste de Chabrillan (1824–1909)

Born Elisabeth-Céleste Vénard, she became a prostitute at the age of sixteen, before dancing under the name of ‘la Mogador’ (Clancy 1998, 3–5; Hone, 2015). In 1854, she married impoverished aristocrat Lionel de Chabrillan before setting off for Melbourne, where he had been appointed French Consul (see Figure 3; Hone 2015). Before arriving in Australia, her scandalous memoirs *Adieu au monde* were published (Mogador, 1854). Céleste and Lionel lived in St Kilda for two years, until she returned to Paris in 1856, Lionel dying in Melbourne two years later (Clancy 1998, 9). In Paris, Chabrillan established her reputation as a writer, with her 1856 Australian novel *Les Voleurs d’Or* gaining instant success: she was later to publish twelve novels, twenty-six plays, seven operettas, poems and songs (Hone, 2015). Her Australian travel account, *Un Deuil au bout du monde*, was published in 1877. Throughout her travel writing, she repeatedly expressed her disdain for the colonial society that shunned her.

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<sup>25</sup> Beauvoir 1869, 200.



*Figure 3— Madame la Comtesse Lionel de Chabrilan; at the time of her marriage Clancy and Allen, The French Consul's Wife, plate between pp. 52–53.*

### **Antoine Fauchery (1827–1861)**

After a failed career as a wood engraver, Fauchery joined the Paris Bohemian circle in 1844 when he began to practise as a writer (see Figure 4; Reilly, 1986, 7; Chisholm, 1969, ix). Fauchery was in Australia from 1852 to 1856, first working unsuccessfully on the goldfields of Ballarat and later running Café



Estaminet Français in Melbourne. His writings, which take the form of eight letters, were first published in *Le Moniteur Universel* in 1857 (O’Neill, 2015). After a brief return to Paris, he revisited Australia on a French government photographic mission (O’Neill). During this time, he produced *Sun Pictures of Victoria* with fellow photographer Richard Daintree (Fauchery, 1858). After a brief stay in Manila, he left for China as the official photographer to the French military expedition, publishing *Lettres de Chine* (O’Neill).



Figure 4 - Cartoon of Fauchery, drawn by  
*NadarFauchery*, *Sun Pictures of Victoria*, p. 14.

### Henry Russell-Killough (1834–1909)

Despite his name, Russell-Killough (later known as Henry Russell) is indeed French, born in Toulouse to an Irish father and a French mother (*Exposition*, 2009). His youth was spent travelling the world: first in 1857 to North America, and then two years later to Russia, China, Australia, New Zealand, India and Egypt (*Exposition*). Russell-Killough was only in Australia for a short stay, visiting Melbourne and Sydney. Upon his return to France, he became a passionate mountain-climber, pioneering the exploration of the summits of the Pyrenees. In 1888 he was appointed Comte des Pyrénées, with a concession at Vignemale, the highest summit in the Pyrenees (*Exposition*).

### Le Comte de Beauvoir (1846–1929)

Le Comte de Beauvoir spent almost four months in the Australian colonies (visiting cities and countryside in Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and the Torres Strait) as part of a world tour in 1866. He travelled with his childhood friend, the Duc de Penthièvre. The two young men were welcomed by leading officials and prominent citizens, and enjoyed an insider's view of upper-crust colonial society. Beauvoir formed a highly positive impression of the Australian colonies. First published as a volume focusing entirely on Australia and New Zealand in 1869, another fourteen editions were to follow before 1886, as well as his combined 1873 volume *Voyage autour du Monde*, and the 1870 English translation (Ramsland 2010, 3).<sup>26</sup> Upon his return to France, Beauvoir served in a variety of military and diplomatic functions (Ramsland, 24). After meeting a group of young Australian cadets in 1925, he wrote *Des Lauriers de France à nos amis d'Australie*, continuing his glowing impression of Australia (Ramsland, 24).

### Anna Vickers (1852–1906)

Anna Vickers visited Australia (Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Hobart, and surrounding countryside, for six months) and New Zealand in 1879–1880 with her parents and two sisters. Their extended family holiday was to visit her brother who had been working in Queensland. Whilst in Australia, Vickers was fascinated by the unique Australian flora. In the last decade

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<sup>26</sup>Some editions were published under his later title of le Marquis de Beauvoir: it is unclear when or why his title changed. *Voyage autour du Monde* included his other tomes *Java, Siam and Canton* and *Pékin, Yeddo, San Francisco*.

of her life, Vickers became a professional marine algologist, collecting in the Mediterranean, the Canary Islands and Barbados (Guiry, 2015). Her scientific work, *Phycologia Barbadosensis*, was published after her death in 1908 (Vickers, 1908). The algae *Vickersia Karsakoff* is named in her honour (Guiry, 2015).

### **Oscar Comettant (1819–1898)**

Oscar Comettant was a composer, music critic for the newspaper *Siècle*, and founder of a musical institute in Paris. In 1852–1855, he visited the United States and wrote the first of his travel writings, *Trois ans aux États-Unis : étude de mœurs et coutumes américaines* (1857). His other travel writings include *Les Civilisations inconnues* (1863) on Japan, South America and Canada, and *De Paris à ... Quelque part* (1869) on domestic travel. Comettant was a judge for the 1888 Melbourne International Centennial Exhibition. During his few months in Melbourne, he stayed at the French Club and built friendships with many expatriates (Davidson, 1985). At the invitation of the *Cercle Français*, Comettant also enjoyed a short stay in Sydney. Comettant is the most politically liberal of the travel writers, describing sympathetically Indigenous Australians and arguing for women’s rights.

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