

**“A TRUE ACCOUNT IN WHICH ONLY
THE FACTS ARE WRONG – HUBERT DE
CASTELLA’S *LES SQUATTERS AUSTRALIENS* (1861)”**

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This somewhat unfair characterization of a lively and valuable book is intended as a caution about the sort of primacy and superior reliability to be accorded first-hand accounts when one comes to analyse the formation of French perceptions of early Victoria.

Firstly, one has to question the absoluteness of the term “first-hand account” itself, and soon arrives at a Mallarméan reflection to the effect that every book exists by virtue of previous books. On one level a truism, at another this illustrates the fact that the “first-hand account” rarely if ever exists in a pure form as an account solely of what the writer personally witnessed. In the case of *les Squatters...*, one of the very first books in French about Victoria, we find that part of its *raison d’être* is a reaction to earlier books, while other books, indeed sometimes these same books, are used to add substance and background to the author’s personal experiences.

Secondly, and at the risk of another truism, whatever first-hand material the author chooses to retail has been passed through the complex filter of his own motivations, presuppositions, tastes and past experiences, involving inevitably a high degree of selectivity and unconscious distortion. If “*le style est l’homme même*”, so too is the content, which is so often the author’s facts rather than *the facts*.

The very motivations of the composition of *les Squatters...* exemplify the two principles. One of the starting points was the wish of Hubert’s father, a retired doctor who hated idleness, that he should employ himself usefully, and his painting activities did not count as useful in this estimation. The first specific audience was the little family circle to which Hubert read his chapters as he wrote them, and one can detect a considerable angling of the narrative because of this. Hubert has gracefully to concede the wisdom of his father’s intervening in his life at a time when he was busy painting in Paris instead of studying to be an architect, then show that it was his younger brother Paul’s success in Victoria which drew him there, while the whole book is a reaffirmation of the father’s conservative and humanitarian values and a proof that Victoria was a suitable milieu for the two brothers’ successful upholding of them.

The other important starting point was Hubert’s reaction to several earlier books which he felt misrepresented Victoria, the squatters or his friends. The book he most violently objected to was the novel of the comtesse de Chabrilan *les Voleurs d’or* (1857), anathema to him not only because of the notoriety of the author but because in his opinion it untruthfully stressed the raw frontier

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aspect of Melbourne and violence on the goldfields. His text contains a number of oblique references to the novel. Antoine Fauchery's *Lettres d'un mineur en Australie* (1857) however is explicitly mentioned and even quoted by way of refutation of its in Hubert's view thoroughly unfair and untrue depiction of the squatter class. Finally, he quotes as an authority on one matter William Howitt's *Land, Labour and Gold or Two Years in Victoria* (1855) characteristically misstating the latter title, but his material on his friend Joseph Panton, Gold Commissioner at Bendigo, is an implicit point-by-point refutation of Howitt's bitter, denunciatory portrait.

Les Squatters... , ostensibly formless, rambling and chatty, the tossed-off product of the amateur gentleman-author aiming to be pleasant rather than sensational or learned, nevertheless has a discernible shape moulded by the author's past as a cavalryman who as such finds fulfilment in the horsey life of the squatter. It also tries to become a more generally informative book with chapters on the history of the colony and on other aspects of life there, some only fleetingly witnessed.

De Castella's brief history of Victoria poses a real riddle as to sources, in that on the one hand it offers an accurate translation of extracts from documents such as Batman's letter to Lord Glenelg and the latter's despatch to Governor Arthur. On the other, in all sorts of matters of fact and detail, it is wrong or inaccurate. On such subjects as the early navigators in Bass Strait and Port Phillip, the Collins settlement in Port Phillip and later at Hobart, the role of Grimes as explorer, and the story of Buckley, the best one can say is that while the broad lines may sometimes be correct, specific details are almost always incorrect. De Castella weaves a story around Baudin's overnight stay in Westernport, but Baudin never entered Westernport, and the ship of his expedition which did stay eight days. Almost all the particulars of area and amounts of goods in Batman's famous treaties with the aborigines are wrong. One is left wondering what material he had access to which enabled him to quote despatches accurately but render everything else inaccurate.

Coming closer to his own experience, accuracy is greater but mistakes or deliberate rearrangements still occur, and in this regard it must be remembered that the composition of his book began several years after he had returned to Switzerland from the colony. The Legislative Assembly is referred to before it existed, the Melbourne which he found on arrival is conflated with the town as it developed during and after his stay, and even on matters like the name of the Swiss family he found installed at his brother's homestead when he arrived, his memory is confused.

In other chapters depending upon personal experiences or long conversations with others, the accuracy is greater and it is these which constitute the real merit of the book. Even the chapter on the aborigines, obviously a clever

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combination of what he had witnessed with what he had been told, would have been a vivid presentation in its day and still has a certain interest because of the sentiments expressed. The material on his brother's two indentured Chinese servants is excellent, as are the descriptions of the daily operations of a cattle fattening station, the social interlude of a house party at Yering and the trip to the Bendigo mines and the Mallee which preceded his return to Europe in 1856.

Yet even here, the account in *les Squatters...* is sometimes contradicted by that in the much later confidential and therefore franker unpublished manuscript "Réminiscences", which however have a cautionary purpose for his descendants and thus may unconsciously rearrange the facts recalled after forty years.

Les Squatters... was published in a very popular form after prior serialization of extracts in *le Tour du Monde*. Although it does not seem to have attracted any critical comment outside Switzerland, it became a source and reference for subsequent writers in French about Australia and one finds echoes of it not merely in secondary compilations but even in novels, so that its contribution to French perceptions of Australia was an important one.

Presumably de Castella's bad history did little real harm and was eventually driven out by good. What would have persevered otherwise is a picture of Australia unlimited where fortunes were to be made and where everything was possible; in this picture idealized squatter figures loom large, there is nothing jarring to spoil the prospect, and at the end of his book the man who on arrival went straight from his ship to the Melbourne Club is able to reaffirm his personal motto that "Everything is for the best in the best of worlds". Ultimately a personal myth also becomes a myth about Australia. Both were to be shattered at about the same time with Hubert's sad and bitter departure from his vineyard in the late 1880s and the economic depression of the 1890s.

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