

**FRENCH PERCEPTIONS OF THE COLONY OF VICTORIA –  
FACTS, FICTIONS AND EUPHORIA**

COLIN THORNTON-SMITH

This talk is based upon reference to the following list of texts, given here with French titles only, except when published translations exist for them.

*Initial group*

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| Herminie CHAVANNES    | <i>Un jeune Suisse en Australie</i> , 1852.   |
| Eugène DELESSERT      | <i>Souvenirs d'un voyage à Sydney (Nouvelle Hollande) fait pendant l'année 1845, 1847.</i>                            |
| C. BROUT              | <i>Guide des émigrants aux mines d'or en Australie</i> , 1855.  |
| Alexandre DUMAS       | <i>Journal de Madame Giovanni</i> , 1856 ( <i>The Journal of Madame Giovanni</i> , tr. Marguerite E. Wilbur, 1944).   |
| Céleste de CHABRILLAN | <i>Les Voleurs d'or</i> , 1857<br>( <i>The Gold Robbers</i> , tr. L. & C. Moorehead, 1970).                           |
| Céleste de CHABRILLAN | <i>Un Deuil au bout du monde</i> , 1877.  |
| Antoine FAUCHERY      | <i>Lettres d'un mineur en Australie</i> , 1857 ( <i>Letters from a Miner in Australia</i> , tr. A.R. Chisholm, 1965). |
| Hubert de CASTELLA    | <i>Les Squatters australiens</i> , 1861.  |

*Other fictions*

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|-----------------------|--|
| Paul MERRUAU          | <i>Les Convicts en Australie (1851-1852)</i> , 1853. |
| Céleste de CHABRILLAN | <i>Miss Pewel</i> , 1859.                            |
| Henry PERRON D'ARC    | <i>Les Champs d'or de Bendigo</i> , 1863.            |

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- Jules VERNE *Les Enfants du Capitaine Grant*, 1867-68, (tr. *Voyage around the World*).
- Henry PERRON D'ARC *Aventures d'un voyageur en Australie: neuf mois de séjour chez les Nagarnooks*, 1869.
- Armand DUBARRY *L'Alsace-Lorraine en Australie: histoire d'une famille d'émigrants sur le continent austral*, 1874.
- Céleste de CHABRILLAN *Les deux sœurs émigrantes et déportées*, 1876.
- Bénédict-Henry REVOIL *Voyage au pays des kangarous*, adapté de l'anglais, 1876.
- Louis BOUSSENARD *Les dix millions de l'opossum rouge*, 1879.
- Ivan de WOESTINE *Une Chasse en Australie*, 1881.
- Louis JACOLLIOT *Voyage humoristique au pays des kangourous*, 1884.
- Louis BOUSSENARD *Aux Antipodes*, 1890.
- Jules VERNE *Mistress Branican*, 1890.
- Later accounts and memoirs*
- Henry RUSSELL-KILLOUGH *Seize mille lieues à travers l'Asie et l'Océanie...*, 1864.
- Ludovic, comte de BEAUVOIR *Australie – Voyage autour du monde*, 1869 (tr. *A Voyage round the World I*, 1870).
- Anna VICKERS *Voyage en Australie et Nouvelle-Zélande*, 1883.
- Ferdinand JOURNET *L'Australie...*, 1885.
- Ernest MICHEL *A travers l'hémisphère sud*, 1888-90.
- Edmond COTTEAU *En Océanie – voyage autour du monde en 365 jours, 1884-1885*, 1888.

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Oscar COMETTANT

*Au pays des kangourous et des mines d'or...*, 1890 (tr. J. Armstrong *In the Land of Kangaroos and Gold Mines*, 1980).

Jules DESFONTAINES

*Autour de l'hémisphère australe...*, 1891.

G. VERSCHUUR

*Aux Antipodes...*, 1891.

Max O'RELL

*La Maison John Bull et Cie...* 1894, (tr. *John Bull and Co...* 1894).

Louis VIGOUROUX

*L'Evolution sociale en Australasie*, 1902.

Now that I look at my title I feel that it might be a bit like *La Cantatrice chauve* – no necessary connection between the title and what I am going to say. When I was first asked to participate in this meeting the area that I was given to deal with was simply “Literature”. I took it that my field lay somewhere between its broadest meaning simply of printed reading manner and the narrower one of *Belles Lettres*, although I found that it is going to be necessary to use most of that range to cover the monograph productions which do exist expressing French perceptions of Victoria. But I shall at least limit the survey to works of the colonial period covering the Port Philip District and the Colony of Victoria, and despite the long list of texts that you have in front of you, it is quite possible that I may not get past the initial group. In fact the first identified French text about Victoria comes from 1852, after declaration of the colony, although there is another one describing a pre-gold rush Melbourne and a sort of a pre-discovery of gold itself.

The range I have referred to runs from the first-hand account without any personal element to the more authentic personal memoir or first-hand account, then to the apocryphal memoir and thence to the fictionalized memoir. This in turn is not far from the autobiographical fiction and we find that even a more fully fictional work is likely to have an apparatus of footnotes or a bibliography to prove that it has been properly sourced and does depict the genuine Australia. There are not only obvious interactions between these closely related genres, if we can call them that, but there are interactions between specific books. There is some sort of interrelatedness between almost all the books in the initial group and in all of them we find some concern to state what the real Victoria is like and that this is the honest truth about it. I want to survey this field rapidly and point out some of the questions which arise and some lines of research that suggest themselves.

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Contrary to what one might expect, given that when a Frenchman comes to Australia he probably wants to describe the country as a whole as much as possible, there is in fact a clearly distinguishable French Victorian literature to illustrate the connection which is the topic of this weekend's meeting.

If we look at a map of Sydney, we see the sea, Sydney Harbour, going into the land, and descriptions of early Sydney in French are the work of captains who came on missions of exploration, or of their officers and members of the scientific team on board. Apart from these, there is a very interesting sub-group of accounts by the French-Canadian *patriotes*, who came to Sydney in 1840 as political prisoners and experienced most of the rigours of the transportation system.<sup>1</sup>

If we look at Port Phillip on the other hand, we see how the land embraces the sea, and the Frenchmen who come to the colony of Victoria head inland and engage in various landlocked pursuits. Descriptions of early Melbourne and Victoria are due directly or indirectly to the discovery of gold and to the continuing euphoria about the colony which this provoked.

The first book in French, as far as I can make out, which mentions the new colony at any length, is that anonymously produced by Herminie Chavannes, in 1852, *Un jeune Suisse en Australie*. This is a didactic novel in the form of a series of letters from a Swiss boy to his family back home describing various aspects of the country and animated by a strong Christian missionary spirit. It was the sort of book produced to be given as something like a Sunday school prize. In fact the copy I have seen has "Bibliothèque d'édification" written on the title-page. It avows a debt to Eugène Delessert's *Souvenirs d'un voyage à Sydney (Nouvelle Hollande) fait pendant l'année 1845*, and other unnamed sources. Delessert was a naturalist on a collecting trip, and he seems to have been the first French scientist to come to Australia in a purely private capacity to engage in collecting. In other words, he was not a member of one of the expeditions mentioned. So we find that most of this Swiss boy's experiences are set in Sydney, but he does relate the visit of a man from Neuchâtel, who had settled in Port Phillip, and this gives rise to an account of how various Neuchâtel people had come to Australia, attracted by the presence of Madame La Trobe, wife of the man who was the first Superintendent of the Port Phillip District, and then of course the first Governor of Victoria. Madame La Trobe belonged to one of the best Neuchâtel families and her departure with her husband and a perfabricated house, for the wilds of Melbourne, provoked enormous interest in Switzerland at the time. We also hear about their villa, named Jolimont, (this is where our suburb Jolimont comes from), of the comforts which are enjoyed by wealthy colonists and squatters, the beginnings of export of meat to England and La Trobe's formation of native police troops. All of this is very accurate and factual.

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The book also relates how:

For the first time, I saw some of the strange features of Australian's vegetation, which I had been told in Europe, had everything the contrary of what we know in the vegetable kingdom; for example that most flowers have no perfume, that fruits like pears hang from the tree by their thickest part, that certain cherries have the flesh inside and the stone outside, like our hazelnuts etc.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, what we have here is an early statement of "antipodal inversion" in nature, but notice that he is merely repeating something which is already commonplace. It would be interesting to establish how this idea of "antipodal inversion" first made its way into French accounts. Had it originated in English accounts or was there an independent origin in French accounts as well?

The impact of English books about Australia upon French perceptions is of course a study in itself, and is one that is much more difficult to carry out in depth. One must not think all of the French material simply grew as completely detached growth as it were, from accounts in English. This question of sources in English has a bearing on the only other reference I have been able to find to pre-gold rush Melbourne, and even here gold manages to make an appearance. The *Journal of Madame Giovanni* is a wonderful example of the apocryphal memoir. Published and ostensibly reworked simply by Alexandre Dumas, who had a sort of literary factory which turned out tales of adventure and travel for an expanding market, it is obviously fictional in parts, and we can be quite certain that there was no such person travelling on a trading vessel with her husband, and using the pseudonym of Madame Giovanni. It is all part of the mechanism of authentication to say that "In writing my memoirs, I am using the pseudonym, Madame Giovanni, not my real name, so there is no point in trying to check". Yet many parts of the book are based on first-hand accounts. I have a theory as to what a partial manuscript source in French may be, but whether this can be verified or not, the fact remains that there must be other sources which could only be material published in English. The Giovannis spend much more time in New Zealand, Sydney, and Hobart than they do in Melbourne, to which they come some time in 1846, and after a brief and authentic description of the noisome tanneries and boiling-down works which line the Yarra, the name of which Madame Giovanni claims not to be able to remember, the story moves quickly to gold, through her husband's becoming involved with a premature discoverer of the metal, who happens to be a shepherd. Even parts of this are factual: a shepherd did come to Melbourne with gold that he had found somewhere but of course the business of Monsieur Giovanni's partnership with a shepherd, the latter's disappearance and the claim that thanks to

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the interest which Giovanni had aroused "Engineers were sent out to conduct experiments at points comparatively remote from one another and ultimately, after three or four years [which of course brings us to 1849-50, still too early historically] gold mines were discovered".<sup>3</sup>

The first French book devoted primarily to Victoria is the quaint *Guide des émigrants aux mines d'or en Australie*, which appeared in 1855 by C. Brout, who on his title page claims to be a miner newly arrived from Australia. The text of this seems to be authentic, despite a few strange statements, and one can only presume that Brout had met with some measure of rapid success as a miner. He offers all sorts of highly practical advice about the luggage to take, how to manage on the trip out, how to get to the goldfields, whom to contact on arrival, and so on. But there is one solution that he offers to the new miner which seems too good to be true; he writes:

Suppose all the money has been exhausted on the way. One just needs to pick up few handfuls of earth and search through it thoroughly; enough gold will be found to buy a little bread.

Don't cry dreams or fiction dear reader: it's just the truth.<sup>4</sup>

He later harks back to this as taking place at Eaglehawk Gully, and it was indeed the truth about that spot in the early days.

But Antoine Fauchery's experiences as a gold miner would have been less fortunate and in one passage of his book, he seems to be complaining about Brout:

For that matter, a good few of them [his fellows passengers to Australia], still simple-minded enough to put their trust in everything that is in print, had taken seriously the little green books on Australia that abound in European bookshops. These confounded little green books, which no doubt have correspondents among all the savages in new countries, explained how California, compared with Australia in each and every respect, — fertility, climate, wealth etc. etc. — was only a paltry and altogether wretched discovery. They insisted above all on one point. "the exorbitant rate of wages"; and thus people's imagination, already heated at the time of departure, caught fire at sea, and continued to burn, thanks to the brandy and beer sold by the captain.<sup>5</sup>

It is a fact that Brout does compare Australia favourably with California and describes how he was able to amass enough money to get to the goldfields by working as a roadmaker for a few weeks. We do know that at this period after the discovery of gold, getting anyone to work on the roads meant paying them fairly handsomely. This is something one finds cropping up in various memoirs; for instance in William Howitt's *Land, Labour and Gold*, there is a very

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ironic passage about how much these chaps earn and how little work they do. The problem is that Fauchery speaks of "little green books", while Ferguson's *Bibliography of Australia* describes Brout's book as being in brown wrappers, so there is a slight problem. But if he is not referring to Brout, what other book about Australia in French, even if it were translated from English, could he be referring to? Nothing has been found as yet. Although three different 'Guides to the goldfields' style of book appeared in England in 1852, so that there would have been time for translations, the only one translated, as far as I can see, was John Sherer's very full account which was published in London in 1853 entitled *The Gold Finder in Australia, How he went, how he fared and how he made his fortune*, but there does not seem to be any connection at all between his book and Brout's.<sup>6</sup>

As we have seen this morning, there is more to Fauchery's book than gold mining: it relates all sorts of other adventures and comments on various aspects of society at the time. In particular, we find that Fauchery is very caustic about the squatters; there is a splendid passage describing how uncultured, unwelcoming and altogether loathsome they are.

The next fictional work I want to mention is *Les Voleurs d'or* by Céleste de Chabrilan, which appeared in 1857, the same year as Fauchery's book. She and her husband were friends of Fauchery, and it is even possible, if she can be believed, that she was responsible for bringing his manuscript back to France. This novel is almost unique among those from the colonial period in that it is written by someone who had actually been in the colony, and there is a certain truth to life in many of the descriptive elements, the rawness of Melbourne, the exorbitant prices, the excitement of the goldfields, the danger of bushrangers and so on. Some of these elements derived in a very general way from her own experience, but basically the plot is developed according to a fairly standard recipe for the time, which we are going to see used again and again. The ingredients for this are a love interest, a reuniting of long parted relatives, overworked coincidence, and a certain amount of what we can call "ripping yarn". *Les Voleurs d'or* has the added titillation of a rape, with propriety being saved by the fact that the heroine is unconscious at the time, and a public hanging, a phenomenon which seems to have a great fascination for the French reading public. We also see Fauchery describing a public hanging and there is another book out under the auspices of Dumas, which describes a quadruple public hanging in Hobart. This had a great fascination because it represented such an unpleasant way of executing a person compared with the guillotine.

Céleste Mogador had married the count just before their ship sailed for Australia and of course she had the lurid past which Dianne Reilly described this morning.<sup>7</sup> She had been rash enough to publish memoirs, undoubtedly ghosted and partly fictional, about this, shortly before the marriage, and word of the

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memoirs and of her husband's appointment, as well as of the marriage itself, beat them to Melbourne in 1854, so that when they arrived she found herself *persona non grata* in many social contexts. Her unfavourable depiction of Melbourne has often been regarded as revenge for the frosty reception that she got from the Melbourne establishment. The story of her marriage, the arrival in Melbourne, their experiences in Victoria, her eventual return to France, and then later the death of her husband, still in Melbourne, are related in another set of memoirs which one must also regard as fictionalized or at least partly fictionalized.<sup>8</sup> With these too there is the possibility of ghosting and there is certainly a high degree of inventiveness, so that for instance, the ghastly trip out which she describes is one which was really made by her husband alone when he came the first time to Australia as a gold seeker without many funds. She quotes a number of letters of highly suspect eloquence, but these letters are from the dead husband and in one case from Fauchery, who was also dead by 1877. We find Fauchery extensively quoting from a press report of the count's funeral which apparently brought Melbourne to a standstill, but Dianne Reilly has established that such a report cannot be found, and so on, and so on. Whenever one tries to check specific details of these memoirs, things start falling apart.

A few months prior to the arrival of the Chabrilan ménage, Hubert de Castella had also arrived in the colony in response to an invitation from his younger brother, Paul, who was in the process of making a fortune from his cattle fattening station at Yering, thanks to the high prices which had been provoked by the gold rushes. As Hubert and Paul moved in the very best circles in Melbourne, they would have been horrified by the lack of esteem in which the French consular couple was held. Hubert returned to Europe less than two years later, indeed his time in Melbourne corresponded pretty closely to that of Céleste, and he subsequently wrote his *Les Squatters australiens*, which was published in 1861. In a later book written in English, *John Bull's Vineyard* (1886), he makes it clear that one of his purposes in writing *Les Squatters*... was to correct the false image of Melbourne and Victoria which he felt Céleste de Chabriland had conveyed in her novel. So what he proposes to do is to lay stress on the civilized orderliness of Melbourne and the goldfields and the prosperity which can be achieved by those who are willing to work. In this book he is also reacting strongly against Fauchery's adverse description of the squatters. As he became a squatter himself, he really wanted to vindicate them, and indeed this particular reaction may have guided the content and determined the title of his book. It is conceivable too that he is reacting to Herminie Chavannes' book which he would certainly have been acquainted with, as a Swiss account of Australia. At any rate he repudiates ideas of "antipodal inversion" as follows:

It has been written of Australia, that everything there is the contrary of what it is in Europe. It has been stated most

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seriously that trees lose their bark, and not their leaves, that cherries grow with their kernel on the outside, that the flowers have no perfume, and the birds are songless. None of these assertions is accurate and the same could be said of many others.<sup>9</sup>

So once again we have someone saying – here is the real truth about Australia. He is concerned rather to stress an essential continuity with Europe, both in the natural and moral orders and to show that in Australia the conservative political values of people like himself can find a wide field of expression. You may remember that in one of the quotations from Fauchery this morning we had that same idea that everything was just the same as in Europe: in Melbourne, there were people in top hats, streets of decent buildings, etc.

Although most of *Les Squatters*... is about Victoria, it was to become a frequently quoted source in later articles and secondary accounts about Australia in general and one can even detect its use in various fictional works, with one element or another cropping up in later novels.

So much for the initial cluster: now let us look at the next group on the list which is simply headed “Other fictions”: Naturally I do not have the time to give you some sort of rundown on these, one by one, but what I want to present to you is simply what the field consists of. There are other fictions of course which don’t contain material about Victoria, but what I want to do is to suggest what they have in common, and outline a few questions which they present. I think the most important thing probably about them all, is a strong instructive element. In other words the idea of *instruire en amusant* – to teach while entertaining, is by no means dead. Naturally the balance of instruction and entertainment can vary a great deal from book to book, but it is always there, and in some we actually get the bibliography at the back, or footnotes, to authenticate the informative part of the novel. Secondly, virtually all of these are written by people who had not been to Australia, and either because of this, or through sheer fantasising, we find that despite all the precautions they may have taken, they get details wrong. How would you like for instance, to walk overland from Cape York to Victoria, without meeting any towns on the way? How would you like to be assailed by a horde of ravening wombats, or by blood-sucking platypuses? How would you like to have a huge snake wrapping itself around your horse? How would you like to chase a kangaroo non-stop for eight hours on horseback, while wearing a red coat and blowing a horn? All these curiosities and many more may be found in various of these fictional works. Another characteristic they have in common, or that almost all have in common, is that they are written by professional authors of potboilers according to a formula containing the elements that I have already mentioned in connection with *Les Voleurs d’or* – especially that of course of the “ripping yarn”, and if

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one looks up these authors in the catalogue of the Bibliothèque Nationale to check the rest of their literary production, one finds in some cases that it goes on for pages and pages and that they have written similar "ripping yarns" set in Africa, North America and so on, so that the question arises as to what extent it is simply a formula which has been transposed into an Australian setting without very much concern for the finer details of authenticity. Could it be that the relative innocuousness of Australian fauna, apart from say snakes (and snakes are certainly done to death in many French accounts of Australia) requires that you have to make the wombats a bit ravaging in order to have the equivalent of confrontation with tigers or grizzly bears or whatever. One might also ask to what extent does the blurring of the distinction between novel and memoirs or letters represent the survival of an eighteenth century technique of novel writing. Before the novel itself had its full *droit de cité*, so to speak, one had at least to go through the pretence that one's novel was the memoirs of someone or that it was a series of real letters or something of the sort.

So much for the fictions. Now let me turn very rapidly to later accounts and memoirs. Dealing with Victoria specifically, there is only one later settler's account which is largely to do with vine growing although you do find many expressions in it of that sort of euphoria in face of an unlimited future which is present in the early works. This is Hubert de Castella's second book in French, *Notes d'un vigneron australien*, which appeared fairly late in the century. Apart from that one account, what we have are reports by travellers of one sort or another who usually take in Victoria as part of a larger tour; they don't come to Australia simply to visit Victoria and go back again. These travels are, inevitably I suppose for the times, made by gentlemen of some means and usually of some eminence, so that when they arrive in Victoria they are likely to be received very well, and afforded every facility. A fairly standard sort of thing was that they got a gold pass for the railways, for instance, so that they could travel wherever they liked as the guests of the government.

Of the common elements in these accounts the most frequent is probably that of "Marvellous Melbourne". There is a shock at discovering this full-blown metropolis with almost all the advantages of civilization, and this of course takes up an earlier theme, which one finds expressed by the very first French visitors to Sydney in the account of the Baudin expedition, surprised at finding civilization of a sort far more developed than was expected in the Antipodes. Connected with the theme of "Marvellous Melbourne", is that of amazement at the Melbourne Public Library, the thought that here was a marvellously endowed and spacious library which any person could come and use, even workmen, who did not have to dress for the occasion. This struck many visitors as an amazing achievement.

Part of the standard trip involved a visit up the hills to Fernshaw, and

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Black Spur, (one of these places, I forget which, has been buried by one of our reservoirs) and it usually also took in the vineyards of Lilydale, with a visit to St. Hubert's, which was of course Hubert de Castella's, or to his brother Paul's Yering or Chateau Yering as I think he ironically styles it, or else to Guillaume de Pury's Yeringberg. Quite a few of them fancied hunting, and offer many graphic descriptions of the joys of hunting lyrebirds, koalas, and other ferocious beasts. There is usually a fairly set-piece description of the aborigines and one finds quite a few accounts of Chinese in the colony.

A sub-group here consists of accounts by people who came to be judges at the exhibitions, that is the 1880-81 Exhibition and then the Centenary Exhibition in 1888. We heard a certain amount earlier about Comettant: this is what brought him out, and there is another exhibition-inspired account by Journet.

Right at the end of the century, we have certain travellers coming to Australia because of an awareness that it is a sort of social laboratory, that various social and political developments are taking place which put Australia somehow ahead of what is happening in Europe, for instance certain features of the voting system, the emergence of trade unionism, and anticipation that Australia is going to become a Federation. That is what we find very much in the book of Vigouroux, the last on your list, and we can compare his book of course, with the famous work by Métin, *Le Socialisme sans doctrines*. Métin does not seem to have said anything specific or personal about his visit to Melbourne, but gives some very interesting accounts of encounters in other parts of Australia. However Vigouroux does give some account of things that he saw in Victoria.

With the twentieth century one sees the emergence of new sorts of traveller, who give very different accounts of Victoria and Australia, and the emergence of new creative works, apart from these mostly very wretched pot-boilers that I have been describing. In particular there are the works of Paul Wenz who wrote a number of novels and short stories about Australia, which have a certain value; I suppose you could class him as a French sub Henry Lawson style of author. Thus ends this very rapid canter through the field.

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### Notes

1. The accounts of the *patriotes* form the subject of a paper by Dr Anne-Marie Nisbet at the French-Australian Cultural Connection Congress, the proceedings of which were published in 1984.
2. Chavannes, p. 114.
3. *Journal of Madame Giovanni*, p. 60.
4. Brout, p. 61.

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5. Fauchery, p. 20.
6. Subsequent checking in the Bibliothèque Nationale catalogue reveals that Shearer was not translated until 1872. On the other hand, an unbound copy of Paul Merruau's *Les Convicts en Australie (1851-1852)*, (1853), also the subject of a paper in this week-end's meeting, has since been viewed in a private collection; published in a small format in the popular Hachette "Bibliothèque des chemins de fer" series, this has bright green paper covers. But although it contains a description of the Mount Alexander (Castlemaine) goldfields, there is no material in it corresponding to what Fauchery criticizes.
7. Presentation entitled "Melbourne through French eyes" in collaboration with Dennis Davison.
8. *Un Deuil au bout du monde*, (1877).
9. *Les Squatters australiens*, pp. 66-7.