

THE GRAND BIBLIPOLE: WILLIAM LEGRAND

JOHN HOLROYD

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Hobart had an antiquarian bookseller who possessed more than average knowledge in his chosen field. This was William Legrand, who appears in these pages because of his French background.¹ He was reticent concerning his personal affairs. We know little of his early years and nothing about his father. William Legrand was born in London in 1816. His mother, who had fled to England during the Revolution, was said to have come from a noble French family. However, we learn from an obituary notice that Legrand had spent much time in Paris during the 1840s. He mixed with the literati, meeting such figures as Baudelaire, Janin, Gautier, Arsène Houssaye, Prosper Mérimée, Henri Murger, Lady Blessington and others. He dismissed Baudelaire with a shrug: "a miserable sort of devil with brains, and a tendency to religion". Lady Blessington he recalled as "a fickle, fleshy creature with winning ways and much of the courtesy that is now out of fashion". Strangely, he remembered these writers as bibliophiles and *viveurs* only. Legrand had known Charles Lamb and Leigh Hunt in London; he warmly defended Lamb against an allegation of disreputable behaviour.

In 1855, when aged about 39 years, Legrand sailed in a French ship from Le Havre to Hobart. It is not known where he acquired his stock in trade, but on securing a tiny shop at 7 Elizabeth Street, opposite the *Tasmanian Times* office, he opened for business as an antiquarian bookseller, the first such in Tasmania. He gradually built up a connection. His emphasis was on early Tasmanian works and natural history, but at the same time keeping a wide range of general literature. Numerous treasures, including two Elzevirs on one occasion, came into his possession. Few rarities of any significance slipped through his hands unnoticed. He does not appear to have issued catalogues, nor did he employ an assistant.

James Erskine Calder (1808-82), who was surveyor-general of Tasmania, and Sir George Grey (1812-98), the proconsul, had been fellow cadets at the Royal Military College, Sandhurst. Calder had been asked to seek material relating to colonial history for his gubernatorial friend then living on an island off Auckland. Grey built up several

excellent libraries over the years. He presented significant collections to Cape Town, the British Museum and Auckland. J.A. Froude was in error when he wrote of Grey having "agents all about the world looking out for him". E.H. McCormick points out that in London Grey "confined himself to Bohn and Quaritch". His Australian acquisitions were made chiefly through Calder, who in turn dealt mostly with Legrand. Calder noted that "Legrand, though a well educated man, writes a villainous hand". In a letter to Grey in 1881, after meeting Legrand in the Museum, he wrote: "I believe he is just as well posted up in conchology as he is in Bibliography. He is much employed at our Museum though if you saw him, you would wonder what the devil such a ragamuffin looking fellow was doing there; for though he must be a well-to-do man, I don't believe he lays out 5s. a year in dress or personal adornment. Judging of him from external only, he is, what we should have called it at Old Sandhurst, as damned a lout as you ever saw. He is nevertheless a man of good address and somewhat Frenchified in his manner, though I do not know that he is a Frenchman either, for his English is not the English of a foreigner at all. I dragged him off to his ship - which is a good deal of a piece with himself in matters of neatness." Legrand was not "well-to-do" as Calder assumed. Most of his capital was tied up in slow-moving stock. Calder's other comments were more to the point.

The late Sir William Crowther, the noted Hobart physician and book collector, told Mr Jim Dally that he had been a schoolboy customer of the "old sportsman's", whom he had always addressed as *Monsieur Legrand*. Crowther, who was born in 1887, would have known the antiquarian from the 1890s to 1902. "He was obliging", said Crowther, "but-ah-dirty". Sir William's father, who was also a leading physician and collector, had run a *contre* account with Legrand - medicine for books. Dally's *Bibliophile and Bibliopole* contains a most interesting note: "It is likely that he (Legrand) was familiar with Poe's story, *The Gold Bug*, the chief character in which is a conchologist named Legrand, and which commences as follows: 'Many years ago I contracted an intimacy with a Mr William Legrand. He was of an ancient Huguenot family, and had once been wealthy; but a series of misfortunes had reduced him to want. To avoid the mortification consequent upon his disasters, he left New Orleans, the city of his forefathers and took up his residence at Sullivan's Island', near Charleston, South Carolina. Baudelaire, who

had met Legrand, had translated Poe's work into the French language and thus would have been familiar with the *Gold Bug* story.

Auctioneer Robert Worley announced in the *Hobart Town Advertiser*, 26 October 1863, the sale that day of surplus household furniture, sundry effects and shop fittings, "by order of Mr Le Grand who is about leaving the country". No mention was made of the bookseller's stock, which may have been placed in storage. Later on Legrand returned to the same premises. He eventually moved to a larger property at 60 Collins Street.

The Hobart of those days had several good new and secondhand booksellers, though none of them had the antiquarian knowledge of Legrand. William Westcott, who had established his business in 1844, claimed in 1859 to have an "immense stock of New and Secondhand Books in various departments". Five years later he advertised "20,000 volumes, new and secondhand". In 1868 he boasted "25,000 volumes English and Foreign, new and secondhand, supplies of the latest books, direct from Mr Mudie's London Library, catalogues one shilling". The old established house of J. Walch & Sons kept a small, select range of secondhand books, mostly relating to early Tasmania.

Legrand's absorbing interest (apart from books) was conchology. A keen worker for the Royal Society of Tasmania, in 1871 he published *Collections for a monograph of Tasmanian land shells*. (F.11562a). In the Preface he wrote: "in most instances I have either collected the shells myself, or received them direct from the places recorded." The *British Library Catalogue* records a previous Hobart edition. This, it states, was privately printed in 1870, only 50 copies being struck off. A species of land shell was named for Legrand.

At the Philadelphia International Exhibition of 1876, the Tasmanian government entered a display in the British section. The catalogue lists Tasmanian shells, "named and arranged by the Rev. Julian Woods, M.A. and Mr Le Grand". Woods took the exhibit to Philadelphia for the government. Julian Tenison-Woods (1832-89) was an English Roman Catholic priest, who in Australia devoted much of his time to scholarly pursuits. He published locally at least 155 pamphlets, chiefly of a scientific nature. Earlier he had had charge of a huge South Australian parish of 22,000 square miles, out containing only five townships. Penola

was the centre of operations. It was there that he met the poet Adam Lindsay Gordon, who recited long passages to him from Racine: *Athalie*, Corneille: *Le Cid* and the classics. Woods was impressed by Gordon's learning, but not by his pronunciation. In 1855 he was a priest in Hobart. He had once taught English at the Toulon naval college.

Legrand died at the New Town Charitable Institution on 1 July, 1902, aged 86. He was buried in Cornelian Bay cemetery. The notice in the *Mercury* twice printed his name as Legrande. He had often been addressed as Le Grand or Le Grande, but the name on his shop facade was Legrand. From Hobart he had established connections with the British Museum as well as with scholars and collectors all over the world. During 47 years residence in Tasmania, he had filled a niche in the cultural life of the community, rough diamond though he was. His premises were never large enough to display more than a selection from his vast stock. When the business was closed down it comprised approximately 80,000 volumes. There were old books, modern books, manuscripts, historical paintings, early prints, memorabilia and aboriginal artifacts. After the sale the residue was bought by a general dealer, one who generally shunned books. On this occasion he did well, securing a substantial number of volumes for a nominal sum.

A leading Hobart solicitor and collector, James Backhouse Walker (1841-99), was very critical of Legrand. Writing to a friend in London, Talbot Baines Reed, who was a typesetter, author of boys' stories and founder of the Bibliographical Society, he observed: "The old fellow is a character in his way, a true specimen of the book-stall man, dirty & rapacious, with a considerable knowledge - indeed, altogether too great a knowledge of what is rare-". Walker published many pamphlets, including two on the French in Van Diemen's Land (F.18064-4^A).

An unidentified newspaper cutting contains an obituary notice which sheds light on Legrand: "Obit Legrand of Hobart, the last perfect specimen of his type in the Australias. In the province of secondhand Legrand was book-buyer and book-seller; but first and foremost always book-lover. Of his family and early history no one knows aught definite. There were few he cared to talk to, and even when facing an approved listener, his reminiscences had a curiously impersonal quality. In the vague heyday of his youth, he had witnessed exploits and encountered notables. In short, Legrand was a remarkable man, a man good to know

in the midst of this perverse and arid generation. He was a survival of the days when men, greatly perfumed and be-ringed, unanimously bore testimony to the nastiness of cold water and the foolishness of over-ventilation. During his Tasmanian decades Legrand grew dingier and dingier. The dust of the outer world crept in, and entering into undisturbed partnership with the dust of heaped-up volumes in decay, constantly intensified the dusky murk of the place. And this same dust circled about Legrand and seasoned him, being never disturbed by moisture from without. But, there was a shrewd and kindly old wayfarer beneath the grime, a strayed reveller from the wider world, a lover of light and hater of the Philistines".

In January 1919, the *Hobart Critic*, in response to a reader seeking information on Legrand and the disposal of his stock, replied: "The library of William Legrand was auctioned nearly 18 years ago. Legrand was a peculiar man and there were few better judges of rare books in the Australian States. When in Collins street the premises were choked up with books, the dust of generations on them. When Legrand's illness closed up his bookshop and there was little chance of his recovery, an expert took it upon himself the task of arranging the library and cataloguing it for sale. The work was a gigantic and dirty one. One remembers going through the library with one of Legrand's executors. The litter was terrible, the books were all packed up in the passages of the ground floor, and the upper stories to the attics were crammed with all sorts of odds and ends in the literature line. Volume was stacked upon volume, without regard to order and some very valuable books were disinterred by those who fossicked about for them. An old Rabelais was sold for one shilling, the first history of New South Wales for two shillings. The minute book from the early regattas went cheaply. The purchaser then sold it to the Regatta Association for a sovereign. Some early water-colours of Hobart brought low prices, as did Tasmanian almanacs from the 1830s onwards. A quantity of other early Tasmanian works was picked up cheaply by a Sydney bookseller.² Had the library been classified and indexed, it would probably have fetched a big sum".

The *Hobart Clipper*, in its obituary notice, considered that "Legrand, Hobart bookseller and bibliophile, just dead, was in some respects a remarkable man. When he got hold of anything valuable or curious he was loth to part with it. He had a keen palate when it came to the

appreciation of customers. To some he was barely civil; for others he would go to any trouble. With the customers of his heart he was never sordid or grasping. The old man had the dust of old books in his soul. It is a dust neither infragant nor altogether disfiguring, and some of us will miss the dingy old bookman more than a little".

Melbourne

Notes

1. The following references were used in writing the present article: *Bulletin* (Sydney)?, no date, obituary notice that mentions Legrand in Paris (I am grateful to Mr Geoffrey Ingleton, of Parramatta, for bringing this to my attention); *The Clipper* (Hobart), 5 July 1902; *The Critic* (Hobart), 24 January 1919; J. Dally (ed.), *Bibliophile and Bibliopole: Six Letters from James Calder to Sir George Grey*, Adelaide, Sullivan's Cove, 1988 (these letters, in Auckland Public Library, give much information on Legrand, as do the editor's annotations); J.A. Froude, *Oceana*, London, Longmans, Green and Co., 1894; I. Hepburn, *No Ordinary Man: Life and Letters of Julian E. Tenison-Woods*, Wanganui, N.Z., 1979; E.H. McCormick, *The Fascinating Folly: Dr Hocken and his Fellow Collectors*, Dunedin, Hocken Library, 1961; J. Tenison-Woods, "Personal Reminiscences of Adam Lindsay Gordon", *Melbourne Review*, April 1884; *The Mercury* (Hobart), 1, 2 July 1902; *Philadelphia International Exhibition 1876: Official Catalogue of British Section*, item 158, pp. 390-1; E. Quayle, *The Collector's Book of Boys' Stories*, 1973.
2. Richard Thomson, a partner in Angus & Robertson.