

DESPAIR IN THE ANTIPODES

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Historians and chroniclers of foreign communities resident in Australia, or anywhere else for that matter, tend to dwell on individuals of signal eminence. The merits of these outstanding persons may be in feats of integration or assimilation, in being accepted and in climbing to the top of the tree in the host society. Or their success may reside in the fact that they resist absorption, that they remain defiantly distinct and therefore figure as leaders in the struggle to maintain different customs, to hang on to old ways, to assert an alien character perceived as superior to the dullness, mediocrity or even depravity of the New World melting pot. The inclination to celebrate and to commemorate is natural enough, but it should not be allowed to obscure thousands of ordinary and unremarkable lives. Nor should it cause us to forget those who fail, for whom emigration provides no solution for personal or career problems. Moving from one country to another is often a traumatic experience, so that we should not be astonished that for some people difficulties are not alleviated but on the contrary exacerbated. Alongside those who profited from Australia's golden opportunities there were, and are, backsliders, Micawbers who became even more improvident under the Southern Cross. Much of this remains hidden, but occasionally a newspaper report reveals some incident or other from the sad underside of immigration.

A case of this kind was discovered by chance in the course of work on one of the more interesting private libraries to be imported into the Australian colonies in the nineteenth century. On 13 August 1870 the Melbourne auctioneers Stubbs, Oxtoby and Company offered the collection of William Story, late of Shrewsbury.¹ Story's appointed executor had refused to handle his estate, so matters, including the sale, were arranged by the Curator of the Estates of Deceased Persons, whose office has become that of the Public Trustee. Although it is not announced on the title-page of the one surviving copy of the catalogue,² a small group of lots had been added at the end. The lot numbers follow on from Story's framed engravings and furniture and are headed "IN THE Estate of the late CHAS. F. D'ALOUSTEL, Esq.". It is, as was quite normal in this period, a rudimentary and poorly printed list, which nonetheless conveys some notion of an educated Frenchman's bibliographical survival kit:

65	Theatre de Corneille, 2 vols., elegantly bound	
66	Œuvres de Racine, 3 vols., do	
67	Theatre de Voltaire, 1 vol. do	
68	Chateaubriand et Les Hommes du XIX ^e . Siecle, 2 vols.	
69	Dictionnaire — Grec-Français	
70	Do Français-Grec	
71	Do Français-Latin	
72	Do Latin-Français	
73	Do Anglais-Français	
		Vols
74	Breviarum Romanum, Sainte Bible, Paroissian, and two others	5
75	Five School Books, French Grammar, and others	5
76	Charles XII., Virgilius and five others ...	7
77	Voyage en Italie, French Revolution, and four others	6
78	Cæsar's Commentaries, and six others ...	7
79	Practical Lessons in French, 4 vols., and six others, unbound	10
80	The French Works, sundry	10
81	Nine do do	9
82	Eight do Educational Works	8
83	Eight do Legal do	8
84	Lot of French Books	
85	Do	
86	Do (mostly educational)	
87	Do	3

It was no accident that these books were put up at the same auction as Story's since D'Aloustel's estate was also in the hands of the Curator, Theyre Weigall. The circumstances are explained in a report carried by *The Australasian* on 2 July 1870 concerning an inquest conducted by Curtis Candler on 26 June.⁴ The article is far too long to be reproduced here *in extenso*. However, enough is said to enable us to situate D'Aloustel summarily in Melbourne's community of expatriate Frenchmen.

Clothes had been discovered on the south bank of the Yarra on 15 June and in them were a pocket-book containing £338 in notes and

various bills and letters. The river was dragged on 24 June near this spot and eventually D'Aloustel's body was found together with his watch and chain. The evidence of the deceased's friends, Guillaume Billiet, wine merchant of 64 Flinders Lane West and John Aristides Dellas, teacher of languages of Punt Road, South Yarra, spoke of low spirits and despondency. Both had known him for from twelve to fourteen years, which situates his arrival in the colony in the Gold Rush years. Dellas was, of course, the Aristide Dellas who published in Melbourne in 1868 *A Key to the Pronunciation of French as spoken in Paris*⁵ and who was described on the title-page as "PROFESSOR OF THE FRENCH LANGUAGE AT THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND GRAMMAR SCHOOL MELBOURNE; AND LATE PROFESSOR OF FRENCH AT THE HIGH SCHOOL, BISHOP'S STORTFORD; ST. MARY'S COLLEGIATE SCHOOL, SURREY; BRENTWOOD GRAMMAR SCHOOL, ETC., ETC., ENGLAND." Since D'Aloustel was not short of money, this could not be the reason for his suicide. A letter in French found in his coat had, in Dellas's view, a first part that was "connected and clear", while "the latter part showed that the deceased's mind was wandering". After hearing the professional deposition of Dr George Graham, of Richmond, the "jury found that on the 24th instant the deceased was found drowned in the Yarra at Richmond, and that he drowned himself whilst labouring under temporary insanity, on the 15th inst."

Some other details are given. D'Aloustel was aged 59 at the time of his death and lived in Collins Street. "He was a French advocate or barrister, but was engaged in Melbourne as teacher of French". His state of despondency had been in evidence since January.

A translation of the letter found in D'Aloustel's coat is appended to the inquest report. It begins:

I arrived here 14 years ago, not knowing a word of English. I was eight months not knowing what to do. My small means were employed in the purchase of the 'Pension Francaise', where I was ruined by credit given to distressed countrymen of mine. I had the good fortune of being appointed professor at the Scotch College, and in the best ladies' schools, where I taught for nearly 12 years. A short time after my being appointed at the college a conspiracy was got up against me by M. de la Chapelle, and the charge was laid before Mr. Morrison, the principal of the college.

However, on this occasion D'Aloustel was cleared by the inquiry Morrison had had "Mr. Nicolson, then superintendent of police" conduct. Morrison praised him and stated that "de la Chapelle and his confederates had endeavoured to make [him] lose [his] situation". He goes on to say:

In the course of my career as a teacher, I never received any reproach from the ladies in whose establishments I taught concerning my behaviour to the young ladies. Mesdames M'Arthur, Rees, Murphy, Eastby, Andrew, Sievwright, Tripp, Kelly, &c.

In a new and more recent conspiracy he had "been accused of having behaved improperly toward the girl Smith". He swears his innocence, but adds: "The law has cleared my character; nevertheless, I was ruined by the charge." The conspirators included a certain Carter and "M. de Dollon, whom I shall not demean myself by styling my relentless enemy". Morrison had again been approached, but had written an unsolicited letter to D'Aloustel on 28 March. Two parts of the letter are torn, but the writer recounts an encounter with a compatriot and a detective and expresses fears of a further plot: "I went out, mad with despair".

I was so much taken by surprise that I have not been able to pay M. Billiet the balance of my board, and £10 to Mrs. Monod, of Ballarat; M. de Castella will be able to pay them out of the £2,040 he owes me; it is the fruit of my labours at the Scotch College and elsewhere. The capital is only £1,500, and I was to receive the interest and capital at the same time.

After alluding again to "my desponding condition, which has never allowed me a moment of repose", he sets out his thanks to M. and Mme Billiet, M. and Mme Dellas and Mme Debeaux and ends by regretting what he is bringing on his family.

Clearly there is scope to pursue the investigation, to verify what is still independently documented and to evoke in more detail this little world of friends and enemies set within a colonial society itself often obsessed with personal rivalries and jealousies. For the moment it is enough to note a minor tragedy and to reflect on what

it reveals incidentally about networks of expatriate French people in Victoria.

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Notes

1. On Story see chapter II "The Richmond Recluse, or the Emigrant Bibliophile" of my *Books for Colonial Readers—the Nineteenth-Century Australian Experience* (Clayton, Centre for Bibliographical and Textual Studies, Monash University, forthcoming).
2. Formerly in private hands, now in the State Library of Victoria.
3. *Catalogue of a collection of more than 3,000 volumes, in classics, divinity, philology, science, poetry, history, biography, geography, voyages, medicine, law, general literature, standard French works, &c., being the library of the late Mr. William Story [. . .], Melbourne, Walker, May & Co., 1870, pp. 25–26.*
4. This inquest was held on the same day as that on Adam Lindsay Gordon. Both reports appear on page 21 of the relevant number of *The Australasian*, vol. IX, n° 222.
5. With H. T. Dwight. Ferguson n° 9083.