

# SIR WILLIAM À BECKETT IN FRANCE

WALLACE KIRSOP

The text reprinted below is taken from Sir William à Beckett's *Out of Harness*, which was published in London by J. J. Guillaume in 1854.<sup>1</sup> There can have been few earlier travel accounts of Europe offered to a general readership by an Australian resident.<sup>2</sup> However, this is no practical guidebook, no forerunner of the Lonely Planet series. In what can be no more than a summary presentation of the book and its author, both of them worth closer scrutiny, a few basic points need to be made.

William à Beckett is not, of course, an unknown figure. The literary leanings and activities of Victoria's first Chief Justice have been recorded by his biographers.<sup>3</sup> As one of the ancestors of Martin Boyd he has had renewed attention in the past decade.<sup>4</sup> That he had serious claims to being a professional writer as well as a lawyer is not in dispute. On the other hand his slim 100-page volume fits quite clearly into a genre that has been much practised: the private record of tourism elevated to the dignity of print. One would like to know more about Guillaume's role. Was this controversial member of the trade<sup>5</sup> working on commission for an important and presumably influential colonial customer? How many copies were produced and for what market? In the absence of the bookseller's business archives and of the judge's private papers it is difficult to propose an answer.

Moving like many of his contemporaries between Europe and a colonial posting, à Beckett was given to shedding possessions from time to time. We know that more than one library was dispersed during this rather peripatetic career.<sup>6</sup> Indeed the leisure to undertake the Continental tour recorded in *Out of Harness* was made possible by a long furlough from Melbourne between February 1853 and December 1854. Silence and discretion are, therefore, hardly surprising.

France is almost, but not quite, incidental to a trip that embraced Belgium, Germany, Switzerland and, in particular, Italy. The author insists on the private and personal character of his narrative. This is, he writes, what he set out to do in defiance of a tradition that requires copious and constant regurgitating of the material of guide-books and of earlier travellers' accounts. Although à Beckett is far from the unremitting querulousness and crabbiness one can find in certain eighteenth-century volumes, his appreciative remarks are tempered by

occasionally acerbic cynicism or matter-of-fact common sense. In our age of media-orchestrated popular emotion it is refreshing to encounter someone who is not afraid to say when he is bored or unimpressed and who expects more from a visitor to Avignon than "a sentimental rigmarole about Petrarch and Laura" (p. 97). There is a place for such low-key yet literate prose alongside the glorious pomposities and the unbridled enthusiasms of other tourists like Thomas Frognall Dibdin, whose *Bibliographical, Antiquarian and Picturesque Tour in France and Germany* was—in the previous generation—an altogether eccentric masterpiece.<sup>7</sup>

*Monash University*

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We took the Diligence from Turin to Chambery, a journey of about thirty hours. We left the former place at three P.M. and reached the latter the next evening at nine. As we crossed it in the night we saw little of Mont Cenis; snow had recently fallen, and was still unmelted near, though not on the road. Unless it be for short distances, and in the coupé, travelling by Diligence is very fatiguing. Not that we had much to do with this kind of conveyance, for with the exception of the journey just named, and that from Chambery to Lyons, our travelling was all by railway or hired carriage. The road between these latter places is very beautiful in parts, and good all along; indeed throughout our tour great improvement was manifest everywhere in the state of the roads, as contrasted with their condition twenty years ago. The old system of driving *à la postillon* is discontinued, all the Diligences being now supplied with a coachman and coach-box. The traces, however, are much after the old fashion, ropes being still more popular than leather among the continental Jehus. It is surprising to see the rate at which these huge vehicles are driven down hill, and what a brisk telling pace is kept up by the fat but sturdy cart-horse looking animals that drag them. Down hill their pace is

somewhat alarming, especially to those who happen to notice the loose rein with which the driver holds his horses, his sole dependence for safety being in the apparatus which locks the hind wheels, a machinery which they manage with such readiness and dexterity that the most rapid descents are generally made in perfect safety. After passing a night at Lyons, we embarked on board the steamer for Chalons, a ten hours' voyage on the Saône. It rained so hard that we were obliged to keep below the whole way, a most disagreeable necessity, as it deprived us of some very beautiful river views, and exposed us to much discomfort and inconvenience from the crowded and incommodious state of the cabin. It was one of the most miserable ten hours of voluntary suffering I ever endured; I defy any one to be happy in a small steamer, with a large party, on a wet day. We arrived, however, if in bad humour, with a good appetite, at Chalons, whence we took rail for Paris the next morning at six, and arrived in the French metropolis the same afternoon at four.

All that is enjoyable at Paris lies pretty well on the surface, and to any one who can use his legs and his eyes, speaks sufficiently plainly. In its gayest season it has more the appearance of a fair than a city. If pleasure be there systematised into a business, business itself seems to be carried on also with an air of pleasure; what may be the background of the picture I know not, but the foreground attractions of Paris are so immediate and striking, that the stranger, however short his stay, cannot fail to be delighted and amused. Certainly its externals are charming. For scenery, costume, and decoration in stage effect—if I may be allowed the expression—it surpasses London and all other cities. The Place de la Concorde, the Madeline, the Tuilleries, and the Louvre, make themselves known and felt as visible and noticeable objects. To what it has of the noble and beautiful in architecture, breathing room is given; none of its *Chefs d'œuvres* are suffocated or hedged in like St. Paul's. Then the Boulevards beat Regent Street out and out for their size, convenience, and gaiety. Each night gives them the effect of an illumination; the

brilliance of the cafés and shops all along, and indeed in those of most of the principal streets, is most dazzling and picturesque. Each shop is got up like a scene, in which is not unfrequently visible a female form, even more attractive in face and costume than the counter-charms (I don't mean a pun) over which she so gracefully presides. But seek to penetrate beyond this blaze of light, go behind the scenes, and the illusion vanishes. Close and untidy rooms, or perhaps, only a single room, with few marks of care for cleanliness, or comfort, reveal the inner home of the occupants of many of those splendid *Pavillons de Commerce*. In truth their true home is in the shop; to be obliged to close that on Sundays would be to them a punishment, rather than a boon. There alone can they sit and enjoy fresh air, and see, and be seen with that freedom and advantage which every Parisian loves. It is not therefore from mercenary motives that the shops remain open on the Sabbath—and in fact, I believe few purchases are made in them on that day. One can imagine that a legislator of the Sir Andrew Agnew class would not be very popular. The public would neither understand him, nor tolerate him.

But who does not know all about Paris? It would be impertinence to say one word more about it. We left it after a fortnight's sojourn, and by the 15th of November, just three months from the day we had quitted it, were again in London.<sup>8</sup>

#### Notes

1. Ferguson n° 5625 states that "there are two editions, one dated 1854, the other undated", but what he describes in his entry is the latter. This undated version (as represented by my own copy derived from the late Dr H. Boyd Graham) is the one reproduced here. It also bears the Melbourne address of James J. Blundell & Co. of 44 Collins Street.
2. The most recent—but a deliberately partial—view of Australian travel writing will be found in Ros Pesman, *Duty Free: Australian Women Abroad*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1996. See Ian Britain's review "*Bon Voyage*", *Meanjin*, 55, 1996, pp. 467–472. It is clear that the 1850s marked

- the substantial beginning of European tours by the well-to-do amongst settlers in Australia.
3. See, in particular, E. G. Coppel's notice in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, volume 3: 1851-1890. A-C, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1969, pp. 10-11.
  4. See Brenda Niall, *Martin Boyd: a Life*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1988, especially chapter 2: "Inheritance", pp. 16-36.
  5. The firm's difficulties—after an initial recommendation by à Beckett—with the Melbourne Public Library are set out in Richard Overell, "The Melbourne Public Library and the Guillaumes: the Relations between a Colonial Library and its London Book Supplier 1854-1865", in Frank Upward & Jean P. Whyte, eds, *Peopling a Profession. Papers from the Fourth Forum on Australian Library History Monash University 25 and 26 September 1989*, Melbourne, Ancora Press, 1991, pp. 33-63.
  6. See Wallace Kirsop, "Australian Lawyers and their Libraries in the Nineteenth Century", *Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand Bulletin*, 18, 1994, pp. 44-52.
  7. The sumptuous first edition appeared in 1821. I have to be content with the second (and revised) one: London, Robert Jennings and John Major, 1829, 3 volumes.
  8. *Out of Harness*, pp. 92-96.