

SOME NOTES ON GEORGES BIARD D'AUNET (1844-1934)

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One way of coming to grips with Georges Biard d'AUNET is to reproduce one of the last entries concerning him to appear in the *Annuaire diplomatique et consulaire*:

BIARD (Georges) ✻ , né le 24 août 1844; admis à l'École navale, 3 octobre 1861; aspirant de deuxième classe, 1^{er} août 1863; aspirant de première classe, 1^{er} septembre 1865; enseigne de vaisseau, 1^{er} septembre 1867; lieutenant de vaisseau, 19 avril 1873; vice-consul à Algésiras, 11 novembre 1879; vice-consul de première classe à Aden, 31 mars 1881; consul honoraire, 27 janvier 1882; vice-consul à Bizerte, 12 mai 1882; à Swansea, 12 décembre 1882; consul de seconde classe à La Canée (non installé), 31 décembre 1884; à Saint-Petersbourg, 19 février 1885; chevalier de la Légion d'honneur, 30 décembre 1886; à Dublin (non installé), 2 novembre 1887; rédacteur à la direction des affaires commerciales, 12 novembre 1887 (pour prendre rang du 1^{er} janvier 1888); consul de première classe à Alexandrie, 10 février 1890; chargé du consulat général de Sydney, 2 novembre 1892; consul général, 23 février 1894.¹

However, since this brief official list of positions held stops more than thirty years short of his death, further information has to be gleaned from archival sources.

Biard's personal file in the Archives diplomatiques in Paris fills out the story a bit.² Retired from 1 January 1905 the former Consul-General in Sydney was promoted to the grade of *officier* in the Légion d'honneur and given the title of "Ministre plénipotentiaire honoraire" later in the same year. He did not die - in Nice - till April 1934. Some more detail concerning his decorations is contained in the Légion d'honneur records.³

If this were all that we had on the naval officer turned diplomat the harvest would be a meagre one. Fortunately personal dossiers are good at documenting complaints, conflicts and scandals. The last word is not appropriate for Biard, but it is clear that his path through the consular service was not altogether smooth and that he may have been

more or less exiled to Sydney. The file is a substantial one and will repay further study by other researchers.

Biard's time in the navy and his involvement with the Société anonyme des Voyages d'Etudes, including command of its ship *Junon* in 1878, need to be investigated. The switch to the consular service coincides almost exactly with his marriage to Annonciade de Lestang Parade on 3 December 1879. Four sons, one of whom died as a small child in St Petersburg, were born to the union between 1881 and 1890. The whole family initially went to Australia, but the wife and children returned to France in 1895. As early as 24 November 1893 Biard had been complaining that Sydney did not offer suitable educational facilities for his boys. None of this will surprise anyone familiar with the attitudes of European officials in the colonies or in countries deemed to be at least partly deprived of civilized amenities.

The Consul-General could, as it turns out, make some claim to intellectual activity and perhaps even distinction. The catalogues of major libraries in the Northern Hemisphere list four works published under his name, three of them in his retirement years. The best known in this part of the world is *L'Aurore australe* (Paris, Plon, 1907), whose chapters—"La Société australienne. Le Socialisme en Australie. La Constitution australienne et son fonctionnement. La Valeur et la situation matérielles de l'Australie. L'Australie vue du dehors"—betray some of the same preoccupations as the earlier report to Delcassé.⁴ A preface dated March 1907 explains that, apart from two previously unpublished chapters at the end, almost all the material had appeared in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* between September and November 1906. The articles in question bore the same titles as chapters I–III.⁵ The author's general intention is clear from his preface:

Ce n'est pas un livre de références. Mon intention est seulement de faire connaître l'Australie dans sa physionomie générale, en apportant à cette description une impartialité que j'oserais dire absolue si j'avais pu me dégager entièrement des sympathies que je conserve pour ce pays.

It is the account of an informed and sympathetic observer, but one who does not forget his former official functions. There is nothing here that is in the least frivolous or vacuous. Australians could, in short, read it with profit.

Much earlier, and before his appointment to Sydney, Biard d'AUNET had signed a play, *La Polonaise, drame en un acte* (Paris, Paul Ollendorff, 1891). The half-title notes that this piece was "Représenté pour la première fois, à Paris, au CERCLE DRAMATIQUE, le 15 mars 1890". This appears to have been his only venture into *belles-lettres*. Two later volumes have him returning to commentary on politics, economics and public affairs generally: *Après la guerre. Pour remettre de l'ordre dans la maison* (Paris, Payot, 1916) and *Après la guerre. La politique et les affaires* (Paris, Payot, 1918). The evidence at present available suggests that these works had limited impact.

The British Library attributes to Biard—on what authority is not clear—a short book purportedly written by "Z. Marcas" and entitled *Emile Ollivier ex-commissaire général de la République à Marseille, député de Paris* (Paris, Dentu, 1865). The liberal stance would hardly have been avowable for an officer serving in Napoleon III's navy. An "Avis" (pp. [3]–[4]) promising the publication by subscription of a whole series of similar studies of prominent literary and political personalities of the Second Empire seems not to have inspired what may well have been a limited readership. The author's undertaking to "traiter ces divers sujets avec discrétion et bonne foi à l'égard des personnes, indépendance à l'égard des idées, et sous des points de vue originaux et curieux" was manifestly not enough.

Independence of mind was a rather perilous quality in the navy and in the consular service. In April 1882 Admiral Jauréguiberry warned his ministerial colleague Freycinet against allowing too much initiative to Biard, then Vice-Consul in Aden. Naval experience had been that Biard was intelligent, but over-confident about his own capacity and judgement. Almost a decade later—on 11 January 1891—his superiors were seeking the removal from Alexandria of a Consul with real intellectual gifts but not sufficiently amenable to orders and discipline. It is in this context that Sydney may have appeared a suitably safe and distant haven. In the event there were frictions, notably with the Consul-General's opposite number in Melbourne.

Despite all this Biard d'AUNET prospered and advanced in the service. If the work on Ollivier is authentically his, a taste for politics is clear from the very beginning of his career. What is certain—and well-attested in his personal file at the Ministry—is that he enjoyed a

perceptible amount of influential patronage. Letters of support and recommendation came from people like Mme Juliette Adam and the future President Paul Deschanel. This is, of course, the world of the salons so interestingly evoked in Antoine Compagnon's recent study of Brunetière and his circle.⁶ It was a world to which Biard's family members were no strangers. A letter in support of Biard sent by Alfred Mézières in January 1894 to the Président du Conseil contains a reminder that the Consul-General's sister, who wrote for the *Figaro* under the pen-name Etincelle, was not a negligible quantity.

What was this family? The name Biard d'Aunet says it all to the *cognoscenti*. Yet it was a name that should not have been assumed and that brought Biard trouble at various points in his career, notably when he was denounced by a temporary replacement in the Sydney Consulate in 1900. A long letter to Delcassé on 25 January 1901 set out to justify what looked like the illegal usurpation of a noble name. In the process Biard shed a little more light on the background to a celebrated scandal of the 1840s.

Biard's father was the artist François-Auguste Biard, himself the author of *Deux années au Brésil* (Paris, Hachette, 1862). His mother was Léonie d'Aunet, also a writer. Her *Voyage d'une femme au Spitzberg*, first published in 1854, and *Jane Osborn, drame en quatre actes*, performed and then printed in 1855, have recently been reissued.⁷ Latterly, and quite appropriately, attention has concentrated on the wife not only because of her literary career, but also because she was a notorious victim of the nineteenth century's patriarchal double standard.⁸ Georges Biard d'Aunet as an infant was directly affected by the *cause célèbre*.

The Biards' daughter Marie-Henriette, the future "Etincelle" and Baronne Double,⁹ was born in October 1840 almost four years before her brother. Early in July 1845 Léonie d'Aunet was discovered *in flagrante delicto* with Victor Hugo by François Biard and a police officer. The already separated wife was imprisoned for three months at Saint-Lazare and then for a further three in a convent. Freed she was virtually deprived of contact with her children. Various dates are given for the beginning of the affair with Hugo, some of them well before the birth of Georges. There is, not astonishingly, a fairly extensive, but ultimately speculative, literature on this episode in the life of the poet.¹⁰

The Georges Biard files add no certain facts about the central event, but they are none the less an interesting testimony. In July 1882 he applied for leave from his post in Tunisia to attend to his father's affairs. His main justification for assuming the style d'AUNET was that his mother had requested this on her deathbed. The Légion d'honneur papers contain a copy of the 1844 birth certificate made in 1855 and authenticated in 1872 after the destruction of the Paris records during the Commune. There was no question, naturally, of the son not being recognized by his father. As part of the personal file in the Archives diplomatiques and in specific reference to Biard's defence of his adding d'AUNET to his name there is a copy of his parents' marriage contract of 1840.

All of this remains no doubt in the realm of *la petite histoire*, but it is worth stressing what surprises can come from dossiers of this kind. Old complaints and defences against accusations can bring unexpected documents into the official records. In the case of Biard readers of *Explorations* will have occasion later to see another example. In the meantime they have learnt a little more about one of the most talented French consuls to serve in this country.

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Notes

1. *Annuaire diplomatique et consulaire de la République française pour 1903*, n^{re} série, t. XXIV, 46^e année, Paris, Berger-Levrault et C^{ie}, 1903, p. 160. This is the last volume in the Monash University Library collection to list Biard as a serving consul.
2. Ministère des Affaires étrangères, Archives diplomatiques: Personnel 2^{me} série, volume 43: BIARD, Georges.
3. Archives nationales: Légion d'honneur, n^o de la matricule 35500.
4. The chapter headings also appear as sub-titles on the volume's title-page.
5. See *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 5^e période, LXXVI^e année, volume 35, septembre-octobre 1906, pp. 100-134, 581-611, and 5^e période, LXXVI^e année, volume 36, novembre-décembre 1906, pp. 287-322.
6. *Connaissez-vous Brunetière? Enquête sur un antidreyfusard et ses amis*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1997.
7. *The Voyage d'une femme au Spitzberg* has been published twice in the 1990s: first with a preface by Wendy Mercer (Paris, Le Félin, 1992), then with a preface by Marc de Gouvenain (Arles, Actes Sud, 1995 in the "Babel" series).

Jane Osborn, edited and introduced by Wendy Mercer, was published by the Institute of Romance Studies of the University of London in 1994.

8. See Wendy S. Mercer, "Léonie d'Aunet (1820-1879) in the shade of Victor Hugo: talent hidden by sex", *Studi francesi*, n° 109 (XXXVII, 1), gennaio-aprile 1993, pp. 31-46.
9. See Hippolyte Buffenoir, *Grandes dames contemporaines. La Baronne Double (Étincelle)*, Paris, Librairie du "Mirabeau", 1894.
10. Louis Guimbaud, *Victor Hugo et Madame Biard d'après des documents inédits* (Paris, Auguste Blaizot, 1927) is just one example from the various writings discussed in Wendy Mercer's article.