

COMTE LIONEL DE CHABRILLAN
(1818–1858)
FIRST CONSUL FOR FRANCE AT
MELBOURNE, 1852–1858

DIANNE REILLY

Gabriel-Paul-Josselin-Lionel de Guigues de Moreton de Chabrillan was born in Paris on 30 November 1818 into one of the noblest families of France. His father was a General in the French Army, and his mother was the Marquise de Choiseul before her marriage. Lionel began a diplomatic career and was attached to the French Legation at Copenhagen for a short period from 28 April 1838. On his return to Paris, however, he led a dissolute life, losing his immense fortune in gambling debts.

In 1851 he left for Australia to try his luck as a miner. The following year he returned to Paris, reporting favourably on the country he had visited. The French Government decided to use the information he had gathered to foster diplomatic relations with the emerging nation,¹ and accredited him in the capacity of consular agent in Melbourne with the title "Honorary Consul, Second Class". He returned to Melbourne, disembarking in July 1852, and occupied the post for fifteen months before going back to Paris again at the end of 1853. In January 1854, much against the wishes of his family, he married his mistress, Céleste Vénard, in the French Embassy in London. The couple sailed on board the *Croesus*² and arrived in April 1854 at Port Phillip, where the Comte once again undertook his consular duties.

Céleste Vénard, better known in France as "La Mogador", was a star of the Bal Mabille, the Théâtre Beaumarchais and the Hippodrome, where she was directed by Laurent Franconi, the finest riding-master in Paris. In 1854, shortly before her departure for Australia, she had published five volumes of notorious memoirs under the title *Adieux au monde*.³ Unfortunately, her reputation preceded her to Melbourne and she was considered unacceptable by polite society in the colony. Disheartened, Céleste returned to Paris in August 1856, to embark upon a literary career.

The Comte de Chabrillan proved to be a popular and hard-working consular official during the final four years of his posting in

Melbourne. Immediately word was received in Melbourne of the Eureka uprising, he was prompt in warning all Frenchmen

to abstain from any manifestation that would aim at disregarding the authority of the Queen's representative in the colony of Victoria. They should not forget that they are in a country friendly to France and the first duty of a foreigner is to respect the authority of the country that offers him hospitality.⁴

He frequently paid expenses for Frenchmen urgently requesting repatriation, and was active in social events in the colony, such as the function he organized to celebrate Napoleon III's birthday at the Criterion Hotel in 1855,⁵ and the ball to celebrate the cordial alliance between France and England during the Crimean War.⁶

The French Consul also took part in the intellectual life of the community, as evidenced by his presentation on behalf of the Emperor of books to the Melbourne Public Library on 13 December 1858, shortly before his death:

PRESENTATION OF BOOKS FROM THE EMPEROR OF THE FRENCH TO THE MELBOURNE PUBLIC LIBRARY.

The presentation of the valuable works lately forwarded to the Public Library by His Majesty the Emperor of the French took place yesterday, at the Library, at 12 o'clock, in the presence of His Excellency Sir Henry Barkly, Lady Young, Lady MacDonnell, the Comte de Chabrilan, his Honor Mr. Justice Barry, and Mr. D. C. Macarthur, two of the trustees, together with his Excellency's aide de camp, and private secretary [...]

The occasion had drawn to the Library a large number of the public, who seemed to take considerable interest in the unwonted event.

The volumes were well arranged upon the centre table in the Library, at which His Excellency was seated, having on his right hand Lady Young, and on his left the French Consul.⁷

Following Chabrilan's speech, Sir Henry Barkly responded, praising in fulsome terms both the Emperor's generosity and wisdom, and the high principles governing the provision of intellectual stimulation in Victoria:

Of none of their institutions are the people of this colony naturally prouder than of their Free Public Library—open, without restriction of any sort, to every class; and His Majesty could have evinced no more acceptable proof of the interest which he takes in our social progress than by such a gift—a gift which cannot but tend to strengthen and cement those feelings of admiration and respect which prevail among us for the great French nation, of which he is the elected head.⁸

There was one incident which marred Chabrillan's reputation. It was when he gave way to impetuosity and intervened between the law and two Frenchmen who had been involved in a duel, taking one of the "belligerent gentlemen under his protection, scaring the unfortunate constable from his quarry by a profuse waving of the tricolour".⁹ The article headed "Consular Dignity" in the *Argus* was scathing of the Consul's actions:

If M. de Chabrillan [*sic*] liked to drag the French flag into Police Court rows, the responsibility rested with him. If he so little understood the nature of his position and privileges as to think he had a right to afford an Alsatia to common offenders against the law, the Court could not help the injury that might accrue to his feelings in affording him a better knowledge of his duties [. . .] We regret that the accredited representative of that nation here should have condescended to wave back a policeman from "the execution of his duty" in the Alma road with the same flag which was borne beside our own to victory on the heights over the Alma River.

Chabrillan befriended his fellow countrymen at work in Melbourne, and in 1858 Fauchery took a portrait of Chabrillan with which he won a prize in the Photography Section at the Victoria Industrial Society's Eighth Annual Exhibition of Manufactures, Produce, Machinery and Fine Arts.¹⁰

Lionel visited Céleste briefly in Paris in February 1858,¹¹ before returning to his lonely exile in Melbourne, where he died after a short illness on 29 December 1858. Past minor transgressions of the law in the course of protecting his fellow countrymen were forgotten as all Melburnians turned out to view his splendid funeral cortège:

FUNERAL OF THE LATE FRENCH CONSUL

The funeral of the late Comte Lionel Morton [*sic*] de Chabrilan, Consul of France for this colony, took place yesterday afternoon.

The procession left the residence of the deceased gentleman at half past two o'clock, in the following order:-

First came two private carriages, containing Dr. Brownless, Dr. Tracey, Dr. Macadam, and Dr. Mackenzie. Next in order came the Rev. Dr. Geoghegan, the Roman Catholic Vicar-General, the Rev. Dr. Barry, the Rev. Fathers M'Evoy, Sheil, Power, Stack, Lane, and Haydon. After this came the hearse, drawn by four horses, attended by D. Phillips Esq., secretary to the late Consul; M. Adet, Acting French Consul, M. Fauchery; and followed by fifty French gentlemen on foot. In the carriages which came next in order we noticed Judge Barry. — Beqs, Esq., Belgian Consul; — Passmore, Esq., Sardinian Consul; — Hentsch, Esq., Swiss Vice-Consul. His Excellency the Governor-General's carriage followed. Next came General Macarthur, commander of the forces, Col. Leslie and officers of the 40th Regiment. Col. Neil's carriage followed, with several other private carriages. In this order the funeral cortege proceeded to St. Francis' Cathedral, where a solemn requiem mass was performed over the body by the Rev. Dr. Geoghegan, and the other clergy in attendance. The coffin, covered with the French flag, upon which was placed the cocked hat and sword of the deceased, was then replaced in the hearse, and the procession moved on towards the Melbourne cemetery, which was reached shortly after four o'clock.¹²

Céleste was advised of Chabrilan's death by his close friend, the writer and photographer, Antoine Fauchery, who was present at his deathbed. The long letter he sent to Céleste is quoted *in toto* in her reminiscences *Un deuil au bout du monde*:

Melbourne, 4 February, 1859

Madame,

I very much wish that this letter sealed with black had nothing more to say to you than you know already.—In accepting the painful mission of being a messenger of sorrow to you, I have made every effort to soften the terrible blow that I must strike.

In such circumstances the pen is always so brutal that I hoped to be able, as a preliminary, to warn some of your friends who without

doubt would have prepared you for what you are about to read from me. If these people attending you have missed their commission, it is because Fate wished it thus.

As for me, I have done my best; do not expect too much of me, Madame, and be strong: your best friend, M. de Chabrillaan, is dead! . . .

You do not believe me, I do not believe myself. One never believes in the deaths of those one has much loved. I have friends in the cemetery whose return I have long awaited; they are not coming back, and yet I hope still . . . —what more will I say to you? Nothing. Expressions of condolence can take one's mind off a momentary sorrow; the one which overtakes you is too deep, it commands respect and especially silence . . .

To struggle alone with deep sorrows until time has made you master, therein lies the unique resource reserved for intelligent natures; they usually experience a series of subsequent sensations, a sort of wild joy which is worth much more than all the obtrusive visits and stock epistles.

When you have wept a great deal, Madame, you will read what follows; it is a short bulletin on the illness of M. de Chabrillaan, a few details of the last moments of his life, sad details in fact, in which you will find again a unique thought, a thought living clear and lucid even in the strongest moment of agony and which, until the hour of his death, was for you and with you.

M. de Chabrillaan, in his correspondence of 15 December would have told you that he felt much better. In effect, since he left the Criterion Hotel to move into his house in Spring Street, his health seemed quite seriously to return to him. Although his features were far from having recaptured all his sparkle, as you have been able to judge by the stereoscope that I made of him a short time before his relapse, we started to recognise our Consul of former days. We believed all was saved.—One sole thing disquieted me however, something which was always, for me, a bad omen: M. de Chabrillaan made plans . . . all too fine, and above all too reasonable! Living with him in the closest intimacy, receiving all his confidences, I saw him, with regret constructing before him a complete future of wisdom and feared one of those unforeseen accidents which too often arrive to make wrong what is right.

My fears, alas! were justly founded . . . It was when we expected the least, when no rash pretext could be alleged, that illness broke out in all its force.

On Sunday 20 December, in the afternoon, M. de Chabrillan came as usual to make his tour of inspection of the workshops of the great photographer.—Pressed to finish an important work, I scarcely replied to his questions, and accusing me of being like a bear with a sore head, he took refuge in our sitting-room where, in the company of my wife, he talked for an hour at least of France, that is to say of Poinçonnet, France not being for him anywhere moreover than there where you were.—On that particular evening I didn't see him leave at all. He pleaded a slight stomach-ache. The next day, Tuesday, at five o'clock in the morning, he was woken up with severe intestinal pain and with vomiting.

He sent his maid for two doctors, Mr. Brownless and Mr. Tracey who, immediately applied leeches and gave him mercury pills.

I was only informed during the day: I found him very weak.

He spoke to me of you who was, he said, in as ill-health as he. The next day, there was little change, except for increased physical weakness, but no great suffering at all.

On Thursday 23rd, he spoke to me of you at great length and finished by telling me that neither you nor I would ever see him up and about again.

I could not believe that the situation was so critical. The doctors were confident, and I thought that he liked to hear himself talk a little too much of his illness and I reproached him for it.

Later, I recalled the strange smile with which he received my words, and only then did I realize my mistake. M. de Chabrillan was neither weak nor depressed before his death; he was sad and resigned, that is all.

On the Friday and the Saturday, the illness seemed to make no progress for better or worse; but, on the Sunday, it declared itself with a cruel energy.

On that day, one of those hot winds, the intensity of which you can appreciate, was blowing violently in Melbourne.

In the morning, I had left M. de Chabrillan much agitated and very depressed.

At two o'clock, his maid ran crying to my house to ask me to go for the doctors: "as the master was dying" . . .

I preceded these gentlemen, Brownless and Tracy, by a few minutes to M. de Chabrillan's, where I found him sitting on his bed, his eyes fixed, breathing with difficulty and prey to sudden hiccups. He complained of a strong choking sensation.

When he saw me, he cried out: "Fauchery, this time I am lost, really lost! ah! my poor wife!"

As a result, the doctors arrived and, after consultation, the gestures they exchanged expressed nothing good.

There is, in certain professions, a type of sinister mimicry.—They suspended all medication and ordered very concentrated chicken broth and brandy and water.

This last prescription revolted the poor dying man who claimed that the brandy would increase further the fire which was burning inside him.

However, it was to this singular remedy applied half-hourly that, I believe, we owed the slight improvement which resulted.

The hiccups ceased and the depression lessened. The intestinal and stomach pains disappeared too, and, dating from this great crisis determined in part by the hot wind and a storm which broke during the night, M. de Chabrillaan was no longer in pain, or at least, until the last moment, no physical suffering caused him to complain.

In the evening of this frightful Sunday, he wished to make his will.

In Melbourne we, Frederic Kresser, Edouard Adet, and me, were the only three who were on a really intimate footing with him.

Unfortunately, our friend Kresser, whom business had called to Sydney, was not able to be informed in time to be with us. Myself, in view of the fact that I was about to leave Australia, I could take on nothing on behalf of M. de Chabrillaan, except to stay by him until his complete recovery.

Ed. Adet was thus the only one who was able to undertake the official duty of executor of his will.

M. de Chabrillaan dictated his last wishes with perfect lucidity. As always, you occupied all his thoughts and he strongly recommended that after his death, we, the only friends present, would not forget she who had been all the happiness in his life.

Our secretarial task completed, M. de Chabrillaan having expressed the very keen desire to see a priest, we sent word to one who had come immediately to his side, heard his confession and administered the sacraments to him.

All these sad formalities complete, M. de Chabrillaan said to us in jest that we had nothing to do but to await his death . . . death which at that very moment crossed the threshold of the house! . . . All of us, we awaited it, and yet, it took two more days and two more nights to climb the steps which separated it from our friend . . . —Two days and two

nights! it is a very long time, Madame, when all hope is gone and when one does not believe in miracles.—But at least, if this step was slow, progress towards it was not painfully impeded by one of those nervous and terrible awakenings which usually precede the last moments. No, if this crude visitor did not look back, if nothing stopped it on the way, at least it advanced calmly and methodically, without noise, violence or trembling; and two hours before it entered, poor M. de Chabrilan recognized me still and tried to smile . . .

There is nothing assuredly in this, Madame, which is able to be immediately consoling; perhaps even, in reading this, you will find that I have said too much, that I dwell with cruelty on the heart-breaking details; that I take pleasure in adding some useless lines to your despair. How do I know?

You will judge me thus, I understand that, in one of those first outbursts of pain when everything is permitted, when one does not wish to listen to anything or to hear anything; but later, I am sure of it, you will come back to these details, and only then will you find them less bitter, especially if you have ever seen a death.

You know how much they suffer, how they struggle, that there are regrets in the last hour for the one who is going to leave, regrets expressed and with what tones! you have sometimes heard one who is at death's door recounting his life and hurrying to say everything to you, what was in the past, what he dreamed for the future; you have seen unfolding, finally, all these black shadows of a black chasm; and I only speak here of mental suffering; you know how many maladies tortured people for years without, on that account, speeding the pardon. Well, Madame, consider—that M. de Chabrilan went to bed on the morning of 21 December, and that, until the 25th, his condition did not seem to be of a dangerous nature, when all of a sudden, on 26 December, he was given up by the doctors. He then dozed until the morning of Wednesday 29th, when he went to sleep . . . and compare.

I repeat, M. de Chabrilan had relatively little suffering, I scarcely left him during his four last days, and I saw him gradually weaken, then pass away. The calmness around him; that which he seemed to value the most, was not disturbed by any of those blunders or negligences to which the ill are so often exposed.

Having given the formal order to his maid not to allow anyone with him but me or those that I thought should come in, I believed I had been very circumspect. As M. de Chabrilan was always of sound mind and since he never showed the desire to see anyone, speaking of you and not asking even for you; knowing well that although sent for, you

would arrive too late, I kept the door firmly closed to all the officials and to the indifferent.

Adet, myself and Sarah, the former maid whom he had had before his departure for France, we cared for him to the best of our ability, and, until the last moment, he was able to rest his gaze on friendly faces.

On Wednesday morning, at half past nine, all being over, we had to consider the last duties to render to M. de Chabrillan.

In this case, we had to reconcile public opinion and the express injunctions of the deceased to proceed with the strictest economy. Having read the report of the funeral which I enclose, you will be able to judge Madame, if things have been done as they should have been.

I translate for you the article which appeared in all the newspapers:

"Today, at the Catholic church, the service took place of the unfortunate Consul of France, Comte Lionel de Moreton de Chabrillan, who died in his thirty-eighth year. The Governor, the Mayor, the Chief Justice, all the authorities were present. Then, following the Marine Officers, came sailors and two-thirds of the garrison; drums veiled in crepe led the funeral march which advanced slowly because of the congestion of the streets. Miners had come in such great numbers that they were obliged, some to climb trees, others to mount the roofs of houses, so as to see the cortege assembling. Women waved their handkerchiefs from windows as a sign of farewell; others wept or threw boughs, flowers, bouquets under the feet of the horses. Cannon shots were fired from the road; then the military music succeeded them. It was really general bereavement. They remember that the noble Count, already very ill but paying attention only to his courageous devotion to his compatriots, took himself, though dying, to the Governor's residence in order to obtain pardon for an unfortunate Frenchman condemned to be hanged. He is dead as a result of his imprudence. The Comte de Chabrillan lived by the heart; he died as he lived. He had the most pleasant disposition; nothing was too much trouble if he could relieve the misery of some person. His friends mourn him and all those who know him regret his passing."

Today, M. de Chabrillan rests in the new cemetery in a plot reserved for him. We have not fancied ordering either funeral monument or inscription. We thought that our mandate did not permit us to take this last measure for which the initiative belongs by right to

the family of Monsieur le Comte de Chabrilan. You will wish to advise on this subject, Madame . . .

. . . We have written to no-one but you, Madame, leaving to you the care of communicating to the family and to the friends of M. de Chabrilan, the news which costs us so much to announce to you.

Your respectful servant,

A. Fauchery.¹³

Céleste de Chabrilan did, in due course, provide the funerary ornamentation for the grave of her husband in the Roman Catholic Section, Compartment P, Grave N° 214, at the Melbourne General Cemetery. Over the years, the monument fell into disrepair, and it was only in 1994 that the Institute for the Study of French-Australian Relations arranged for its restoration.

State Library of Victoria

Notes

1. "Le comte Lionel de Moreton de Chabrilan", *L'illustration*, 30 avril 1859, p. 283. Trans. by Dianne Reilly.
2. Céleste de Chabrilan, *Un deuil au bout du monde*, Paris, Librairie Nouvelle, 1877, p. 9. Trans. by Dianne Reilly.
3. Céleste de Chabrilan, *Adieux au monde; mémoires de Céleste Mogador*, Paris, Locard-Davi et de Vresse, 1854, 5 vols.
4. Poster: "Le Consul de France aux Français résidant dans la Colonie de Victoria", Sovereign Hill, Ballarat, 1852.
5. *Argus*, 16 August 1855, p. 5.
6. *Argus*, 18 August 1855, p. 5.
7. *Age*, 14 December 1858, p. 1.
8. Loc. cit.
9. *Argus*, 15 March 1856, p. 4.
10. Victoria Industrial Society, *Catalogue of the 8th Annual Exhibition of Manufactures, Produce, Machinery and Fine Arts*, Melbourne, Shaw, Harnett, 1858.
11. *Argus*, 6 February 1858, p. 4.
12. *Age*, 1 January 1859, p. 5.
13. Céleste de Chabrilan, *Un deuil au bout du monde*, p. 252.