

EDMOND ABOUT IN AUSTRALIA

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At the annual conference of the *History of the Book in Australia* project in Sydney in September 1998 Pat Buckridge delivered a paper on "Reading the Classics in Australia: Great Book Anthologies, 1900–1960". Subsequently this was published in the *Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand Bulletin*.¹ Discussing *The World's Great Books*, edited by Arthur Mee and J. A. Hammerton in five volumes in 1908 for the Northcliffe organization, he notes that there are over 1000 condensations and adds:

Needless to say, the list of authors extends well beyond even the most generous recent versions of the literary canon. By way of illustration, the first item of the first volume is *The King of the Mountains* by none other than the French novelist Edmond About!²

The exclamation mark of the printed version was accompanied in the oral presentation by a question as to whether anybody had heard of About. The Editor of *Explorations* pleaded guilty and vowed inwardly to take up the challenge of demonstrating that About had once been familiar to large numbers of Australians.

In France itself it would be rash to claim that About's was still a household name. However, election to the Académie française in 1884 ensured that he would have a sort of posthumous visibility. The 1960 edition of the *Petit Larousse* duly records, for example, "ABOUT (Edmond), écrivain français, né à Dieuze (Moselle) [1828–1885]. Spirituel auteur du *Roi des montagnes*, du *Roman d'un brave homme*. (Acad. fr.)". The word "witty" is frequently used about him, as in the *Oxford Companion to French Literature*³ and the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of French Literature*.⁴ The same theme recurs in the preface to what remains the standard bibliography of works by About and early studies of him:

Ecrivain spirituel, d'une grande pureté de langue, il s'occupa de questions sociales et religieuses, où il fit montre d'un scepticisme foncier et d'un grand attachement aux idées démocratiques.⁵

In the characterization of the language of About's works it is easy to see a feature that would have been particularly attractive to foreigners seeking accessible and pedagogically respectable texts in modern French.

About is classified in Gustave Lanson's *Manuel bibliographique de la littérature française moderne XVI^e, XVII^e, XVIII^e et XIX^e siècles* in a heterogeneous collection of novelists described as "A côté du naturalisme".⁶ Some of these writers, like Eugène Fromentin, Jules Verne and Jules Vallès, are anything but obscure, whereas others, like About, have had little critical attention since the Second World War. Klapp's *Bibliographie der französischen Literaturwissenschaft* lists a dozen relevant items for the period 1956–1997, including two editions (the most recent in the L'Harmattan series "Les Introuvables") and an unpublished thesis of 1982. It is a meagre harvest on a *normalien* and researcher at the Ecole française d'Athènes who turned away from an academic career to writing under the Second Empire and in the early years of the Third Republic. Novels, plays, pamphlets, art criticism and journalism made up the substantial output of a talented and committed intellectual, whose contemporary reputation alone calls for some examination by people interested in literature's social and economic dimension.⁷

Some of the evidence concerning the impact of Edmond About on late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Australia has already been laid out in a brief sketch devoted to the authors included in school and university curricula as well as read and collected in the community at large.⁸ It is not hard to provide further details. Alan Barcan, looking at the character of French studies in Australian school education, reinforces the point:

At the Senior Exam in November 1907 the subjects were About, *Le Roi des montagnes* and Delavigne, *Les Enfants d'Edouard*. [. . .] (In 1938 I studied *Le Roi des montagnes* for the Leaving Certificate. Shortly afterwards it was discarded as too difficult a text.)⁹

It is true that About did not appear in the early calendars of the University of Queensland between 1911 and 1918, but a copy of the full text of *Le Roi des montagnes* awarded as a prize at Ipswich Girls Grammar School in 1905 suggests that Sydney tastes were not unknown north of the border.¹⁰

Schoolchildren in particular were not always exposed to *Le Roi des montagnes* in its pristine state. About's French publisher, Hachette, included several of his books in its series of Modern French Authors. Henri Testard, the editor and annotator of *Le Roi des montagnes*, reproduces in his preface a letter from About authorizing some bowdlerization of the text "à l'usage des Collèges anglais".¹¹ The author's relatively early death and American attitudes to international copyright ensured that this valuable textbook property would eventually be exploited by others. The Elliott M. Grant and Louise Bourgoïn version for Heath's Modern Language Series, copyright 1930, was reprinted in Sydney for the Australasian Publishing Company by arrangement with Harraps in 1943,¹² which gives some notion of the book's durability here.

What explains the success of a story of nineteenth-century Greek banditry? Beyond the penny dreadful associations,¹³ one returns to affirmations of the perennial value of a certain French classical tradition. Grant and Bourgoïn, in their preface to an edition shortened by 35 pages, state the familiar theme:

No apology is needed to justify a new edition of *Le Roi des montagnes*. As long as the French language is taught abroad, this gay little novel will justly remain a favourite. It is an excellent example of that limpid, racy French prose which is universally admired. The narrative itself is of absorbing interest. It contains not only a great deal of action, but much crisp and clever dialogue. The book is, therefore, eminently suited to French classes in this country.¹⁴

In the terms of the 1990s it would be possible to see *Le Roi des montagnes* as having an uncomfortable degree of political incorrectness. Grant and Bourgoïn rightly point out in their introduction¹⁵ the relationship between About's *La Grèce contemporaine* of 1854, "a sprightly and satirical account of his observations in Greece", and the novel published two years later. Indeed they remark that the earlier book, surrounded by controversy, was "a blow from which the cause of philhellenism never wholly recovered".

It was precisely because Edmond About was more than a teller of stories that he appeared in a number of major nineteenth-century Australian collections. Some About titles in the Mitchell Library came from David Scott Mitchell himself, a connoisseur of nineteenth-century

French literature.¹⁶ By 1880 the Public Library of Victoria had added several of the narrative works to its earlier acquisition of About's polemics and journalism.¹⁷ In English translation the author of the *King of the Mountains* was also present in the library of the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts.¹⁸

None of this is surprising if one remembers the attentiveness of serious Australian readers to what was happening in Europe and the reputation About had quickly earned as a polemicist. In fact he was drawn into local Melbourne arguments in James E. Carnegie's *Masonic Reform: being an answer to the useless and futile excommunication lately fulminated against the ancient and noble craft by Pope Pius IX. by Edmond About: prefaced by a brief introduction by an old Mason: and the resolution passed on the subject at the meeting of the Lodge La Vérité of Marseilles, on the 1st of September, 1865.*¹⁹ Carnegie's introduction explains the circumstances of the publication:

I recently received from the Lodge *La Vérité* of Marseilles, a copy of M. E. About's pamphlet in defence of Freemasonry, and with it a request from the Master of the lodge, that I would translate and circulate it in this colony. M. Edmond About's name is so well known as a member of the great commonwealth of literature, that it would be the merest impertinence if I were to endeavour to demonstrate his singular fitness for any task involving the qualification of brilliant authorship.²⁰

Literary fame is fleeting, as is clear from more recent neglect of Edmond About. None the less there is a case for examining more closely the fortunes, the reception of an author whom posterity has largely—and perhaps a little unjustly—disregarded.

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Notes

1. Volume 23, 1999, pp. 36–45.
2. Page 37.
3. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1959, p. 2.
4. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1976, p. 2.

5. H. Talvart & J. Place, *Bibliographie des auteurs de langue française (1801-1927)*, volume I, Paris, Chronique des Lettres, 1928, pp. 3-9, esp. p. 3.
6. Nouvelle édition revue et corrigée, Paris, Hachette, 1931, pp. 1347-1350.
7. A starting point could be a precise study of the edition sizes of About's novels published by Hachette. The example of *Le Roman d'un brave homme* is presented by Henri-Jean Martin in "Comment mesurer un succès littéraire. Le problème des tirages" in Giles Barber et al., *La Bibliographie matérielle*, Paris, Editions du CNRS, 1983, pp. 25-42 (reprinted in Henri-Jean Martin, *Le Livre français sous l'Ancien Régime*, Paris, Promodis/Editions du Cercle de la Librairie, 1987, pp. 209-223).
8. See Wallace Kirsop, "Classrooms, Connoisseurs and Canons: Nineteenth-Century French Literature in Australia", *Australian Journal of French Studies*, XXX, 1993, pp. 145-153.
9. "French in Australian Schools" in Marie Ramsland, ed., *Variété: Perspectives in French Literature, Society and Culture. Studies in Honour of Kenneth Raymond Dutton, Emeritus Professor, The University of Newcastle, Australia*, Frankfurt am Main/Berlin/Bern/New York/Paris/Wien, Peter Lang, 1999, pp. 31-50, esp. p. 39.
10. See W. Kirsop, art. cit., p. 147.
11. E. About, *Le Roi des montagnes*, ed. H. Testard, "new edition, carefully revised", London, Hachette and Company, 1903, p. vii.
12. Copy with the ticket of Anthony Hordern's donated to the Mitchell Library in 1965.
13. Cf. *The boy brigand; or, The dark king of the mountains. A tale of Italy* [. . .]. See Elizabeth James and Helen R. Smith, *Penny Dreadfuls and Boys' Adventures. The Barry Ono Collection of Victorian Popular Literature in The British Library*, London, The British Library, 1998, n° 41, p. 9 (text dated circa 1865).
14. P. iii.
15. Pp. vii-x.
16. See Wallace Kirsop, "A Note on Stendhal's Early Australian Readers", *Australian Journal of French Studies*, XX, 1983, pp. 252-256.
17. *The Catalogue of the Public Library of Victoria*, Melbourne, 1880, 2 volumes, I, p. 4; II, p. 1973.
18. *Catalogue of the Libraries of the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts, 1901*, Sydney, Ross, Mann & Co., Printers, 1901, pp. 1, 210.
19. Melbourne, W. H. Williams, [1866], 32 pp. (Ferguson 5631—two copies in the La Trobe Collection of the State Library of Victoria).
20. P. 5.