

# R. S. ROSS ON FRENCH LITERATURE

WALLACE KIRSOP

It is now just over a century since William Charles Andrade set up at 201 Bourke Street, Melbourne, "the first business which could both qualify as a bookshop and legitimately claim to specialise in radical literature".<sup>1</sup> Apart from John Sendy's account of this aspect of the trade, we have the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* article on the brothers David Alfred (1859–1928) and William Charles Andrade (1863–1939) to fill out the record, largely carried in labour-history publications, on these "anarchists and booksellers".<sup>2</sup> Reminiscences and advertisements in socialist journals are often the best contemporary testimony on how the businesses functioned. Yet it is possible—as with so many other aspects of the book world in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Australia—to wonder how much of the full story is hidden from us by the destruction of private papers and of printed ephemera.

A while ago I was able to acquire from Kenneth Hince, who has always been attentive to the relics of his own calling, a copy of *Andrade's Catalog of Books for Radicals. Socialism, Anarchism, Industrialism, Rationalism, Sexology and Kindred Subjects*, Andrade, 201 Bourke St, Melbourne, [no date]. This small (133 × 102 mm), stapled pamphlet of 64 pages carries a certain number of pencil markings by an earlier owner and reader. The *Australian National Bibliography 1901–1950* contains an entry<sup>3</sup> for something that appears to be this item, except that "Socialist Party of Victoria" is part of the imprint. The date suggested is 1919. The La Trobe Collection of the State Library of Victoria holds something that corresponds to this description and that may well be the catalogue in question.<sup>4</sup> The differences are slight, but real, and underline the bibliographical problems of this sort of publication.

The La Trobe exemplar, unlike mine, has a red lower wrapper, as well as being slightly taller (140 mm). The verso, apart from offering a line drawing of Andrade's shop, lists the available catalogues:

1. Plays and Recitations.
2. Magical Apparatus and Books.
3. Useful Books.
4. Books for Home Builders.

5. Mechanical & Engineering Books.
6. Popular Medical Books.
7. Socialistic Books.
8. Cheap Novels.
9. Australian Books.
10. Books on Sports and Athletics.
11. Theatrical Wigs, Beards, Grease Paints, Carnival Masks, etc.
12. Songs and Music.

How many of these have survived? Their subjects give a good idea of the business's range and emphases even in later decades. Mail-order instructions highlight the importance of this aspect of specialist trading in the years after the First World War. However, *Andrade's Catalog of Books for Radicals* is a more catholic selection than its title indicates and it certainly extends into general literature. Apart from a section on "novels and plays" (pp. 45-49), including substantial lists of works by Jack London, H. G. Wells, Dostoevsky, G. B. Shaw, Ibsen, Oscar Wilde, Strindberg, Galsworthy, Tolstoy, Gorky and Upton Sinclair, there is provision for "sociological novels" (pp. 42-44) and for "historical novels of social significance" (pp. 50-62).

The "sociological" group includes, predictably enough, on page 44:

**GERMINAL.** — EMILE ZOLA. Hardly a finer word-picture of the class struggle between Capital and Labor. The struggles of wage slaves in France, culminating in a coal miners' strike, make interesting reading. Paper, posted, 8d.

**DOWNFALL.** — EMILE ZOLA. This brilliant novelist excels himself in this heartrending description of the sufferings of the victims of war. The Franco-Prussian war of 1870 is the theme round which the author weaves his romance.

Paper, posted, 8d.

French novels figure more prominently still in the "historical" category, which was

Specially written for this catalogue by R. S. ROSS (editor "Ross's Magazine" and the "Socialist," author of "Eureka; Freedom's Fight of '54").

Joy Damousi's article on Robert Samuel Ross (1873-1931), father of Lloyd and Edgar, in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* aptly notes that he "was a socialist with strong literary leanings".<sup>5</sup> His long career in journalism and in political and trade-union organizing was marked by his interest in books and reading. This is particularly evident in *Ross's Magazine of Protest, Personality and Progress*, later *Ross's Monthly of Protest, Personality and Progress*, published between 1915 and the end of 1923. The journal issues in its first year are filled with advertisements and announcements for Ross's Book Service, which operated from the same address as the printers Fraser and Jenkinson and specialized in its turn in mail orders. Given that Ross was Secretary of the Socialist Party of Victoria, the link with Andrade's catalogue is hardly surprising. Indeed John Sendy, who has a chapter on "The VSP and Ross's Book Service" (pp. 45-59), claims that "Bob Ross produced also a *Catalogue of Books for Radicals* which carried book notes on a wide range of literature" (p. 52). This sounds suspiciously like the Andrade catalogue and reinforces the perception that we need tighter bibliographical control of all this material. In the meantime it is instructive to see what an autodidact and "omnivorous reader of socialist and rationalist literature"<sup>6</sup> made of the French tradition.

A "Foreword" (pp. 51-52) to the reviews of historical novels speaks of "Mr. Ross" in the third person and may not be all his own work. However, the stance is undoubtedly his:

The tabloid reviews, if such they may be designated, are the work of one particularly partial to a class of historical novels, and who has for years endeavored to trace and to read the chief novel surrounding a special working-class figure or event, believing that a good novel of an agitator, or uprising, agitation, insurrection or revolution, will often convey more of atmosphere and realism, and even of actuality, than merely bald history. He is constantly in receipt of requests for advice and information as to what novel to read as a "living picture" of this or that event or movement.

He apologizes for the unavoidable selectivity of his list and mentions other titles—by Scott, Samuel Lover, Jane Porter, Lytton and Charles Kingsley—that could have been included. Overall the well-chosen novel is the necessary accompaniment of historical study:

To understand the present, and direct the future, you must know the past. As indispensable companion to the solid book, the historical novel puts the microscope on some bold, outstanding figure or event, and does for the mind what the "movie" does for the eye. Probe and delve minutely and painstakingly as you will, and you ignore THE novelist, then one thing you will lack. It will be the indelible impressionism that strengthens retrospect and outlook beyond effacement. History is recorded fact; fiction is realer fancy. The one is mere say-so, and little more; the other is captured atmosphere, color and life.

Despite the English-speaking base of Ross's enthusiastic literary culture, there is a decided international dimension, represented, apart from Tolstoy, by French authors: Flaubert, Erckmann-Chatrian, Alexandre Dumas, Anatole France, Victor Hugo and Eugène Sue. Some samples will give the flavour of writing that can certainly not be said to have the astringency of A. E. Housman's prose. The choice does not always correspond to obvious ideological constraints, as for example apropos of Flaubert's *Salammbô*:

This realistic romance of ancient Carthage could hardly be surpassed in presenting to an entirely changed world the gorgeous colour, pageantry, and warfare of the breathlessly-attractive days of the Carthaginians, when they were in their full prestige, power, wealth, and conquest. In richness of incident, as in richness of descriptive depiction—particularly of the battlefields and the bloody combats upon them—"Salambo" is strong in the spectacular. It is unassailably great in its recitals of the internecine feuds waged with all the relentlessness of the primordial character by men of military genius and commanding personality. "Salambo," in the splendour of its language, is only equalled by the ravishment of its art (p. 54).

Several works, including Dickens's *Tale of Two Cities* and Patricia Wentworth's *A Marriage under the Terror*, are presented as desirable readings around the French Revolution. Again it is hard to detect the sort of Marxist analysis that was emerging in French historical circles in the earlier part of the twentieth century. The French works chosen are Erckmann-Chatrian's *The States-General*, Dumas's *The Taking of the Bastille*, Anatole France's *The Gods are Athirst* and Victor Hugo's *Ninety Three*.

Ross's taste appears to be firmly anchored in the late nineteenth century of his youth.

The commentator is not unaware, however, of the way in which literary canons are formed and evolve inside different national cultures. The last item treated is Eugène Sue's monumental series *The Mysteries of the People, or The History of a Proletarian Family across the Ages* (pp. 61-62):

Eugene Sue would appear to be one of the great French authors who take higher rank than English-speaking peoples concede. As a fictional creation—ignoring, if you will, its theme—"The Wandering Jew" is a monumental story of climax surmounting climax right to the height of farthest pinnacle of the mountains. It is a galaxy of breathlessly-riveting sensation plus sensation. Then "The Mysteries of Paris," in its sphere, is almost without a peer. These books are well known, but comparatively little known is a remarkable series of nineteen books with the covering designation, "The Mysteries of the People, or History of a Proletarian Family Across the Ages." Thanks to the late Daniel De Leon, of the American Socialist Labor Party, this series of stories has been translated into English, and forms a matchless promenade through the history of the common people from some years before Christ until the Second Republic in France. There could hardly be a better way of glimpsing the climbing of humanity than by medium of these stories, with their outlook upon the lot of the people in all times. Under the form of romance, one finds the most scrupulous history, claimed De Leon. In these books there are pages of dialogue in chapters of incident that are transcripts of facts. Of the atmosphere and life of the people, Sue's studies are a blazing bush. They are also more than photographic interpretation of revolutionary spirit and acts; they are a lightning flash upon the feelings of the "bottom dogs" whose heritage was memory of suffering and oppression, whose past is made plain in sort of impressionist suggestions, and whose hopes and ideals are limned graphically and movingly.

Leaving aside the writing, which reads too often like advertising copy (Ross was, after all, a bookseller!), we are confronted with the diversity of the French culture embraced by Australians of widely different backgrounds. There is much to be said still about the reception of authors like Sue, who has only recently emerged from academic neglect.

## Notes

1. John Sedy, *Melbourne's Radical Bookshops. History, People, Appreciation*, Melbourne, International Bookshop Pty Ltd, 1983, p. 27.
2. Volume 7: *1891-1939 A-Ch*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1979, pp. 64-65.
3. N° 48121, p. 2035.
4. LTP 016.335 W66C.
5. Volume II: *1891-1939 Nes-Smi*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1988, pp. 457-459. Ross's name is rarely absent from studies of early-twentieth-century Australian socialism or labour history. See, for example, for a variety of viewpoints: Brian Kennedy, *Silver, Sin, and Sixpenny Ale. A Social History of Broken Hill 1883-1921*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1978, pp. 88, 90-98, 132 (Ross as editor of the *Barrier (Daily) Truth*); Sydney Labour History Group, *What Rough Beast? The State and Social Order in Australian History*, Sydney, George Allen & Unwin, 1982, pp. 86, 173, 177; Verity Burgmann, "In Our Time". *Socialism and the Rise of Labor, 1885-1905*, Sydney, George Allen & Unwin, 1985, pp. 102-103, 183, 186, 190; Verity Burgmann & Jenny Lee, eds, *A People's History of Australia since 1788: Constructing a Culture*, Melbourne, McPhee Gribble/Penguin Books, 1988, pp. 266, 268; Stuart Macintyre, *The Reds. The Communist Party of Australia from Origins to Illegality*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1998, pp. 46, 50-51, 107, 109, 237, 316.
6. J. Damousi, p. 458.