

# THE STATE LIBRARY OF VICTORIA AND ITS FRENCH COLLECTIONS

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Longtime readers of *Explorations* will remember that in our n° 8 (December 1989) we reproduced (pp. 11–30) the catalogue of an exhibition held in July–August 1989 to celebrate the bicentenary of the French Revolution.<sup>1</sup> This event took place at the State Library of Victoria and used material from that institution's collections. I had occasion then (especially pp. 14–15) to reflect on the policies adopted by the Library over more than a century to document in the broadest possible way the background to Australian civilization. Sadly, too, I was moved to comment on "the stultifying particularism that is so constant a risk for Australian studies as many of our educational establishments are interpreting them". It is far from certain that that parochial tendency has been overcome. Indeed, now that we have reached the twenty-first century, there are on every side—from authors and presses of repute—examples of reckless disregard for accurate transcription of foreign names, words and titles. Editors are constantly thanked by name (contrary to the practice adopted in an earlier generation by Beatrice Davis) for their role in failing to remove errors and misspellings of the most elementary kind. For a reader with Housman's sense of duty and fortified by Nicholsonian pedantry it is too often an ordeal to traverse what emerges from our publishing houses. In a world that talks much about "quality control" and "excellence" it is the virtual absence of these things that is striking. How are we to recover standards for which we Australians were once respected—not least in France—and what does the State Library's collecting policy have to do with it?

In the nineteenth century the Library was ambitious in ways the depression of the 1890s and all the disturbances of the following hundred years would inevitably frustrate. However, it is salutary to return from time to time to these old expressions of a sort of Bostonian grandeur. The preface Raymond Barry wrote for the printed catalogue of 1880,<sup>2</sup> as assuredly his monument as the statue erected in 1887, brought together various documents—prefaces and speeches—of the previous quarter of a century and embedded them in a narrative of the institution's progress. Three pages (xxix–xxxi) were devoted to explaining the principles on which the collection was built up in close co-operation with the three other major libraries of Melbourne, those of the Parliament, the University and the Supreme Court. The carefully concerted policy aimed to "avoid the needless multiplication of copies

of the same book", thus prefiguring various much later attempts of the same kind in both hemispheres. Without Barry's authority and punctilious attention to detail any such plan was likely to be abortive, as historians of libraries know well.

Reference is made to "directions to the Booksellers in Amsterdam, Berlin, Brussels, London, Paris, and Vienna", signalling in this fashion an intention to go well beyond the Anglophone world. The uncompromising breadth of the Library's aims is clear:

The Trustees regarded the Institution as a Public Library of reference, consultation, and research, which ought to be characterised by a comprehensiveness which would stamp it not merely as national, but universal. They considered that it ought to contain all works required to meet the demands of all ordinary readers, the wants of men of every profession, trade, calling, and occupation, the desires of those who indulge in the pursuit of polite literature and of every branch of human inquiry.

They were of opinion that, as the community which partakes of the benefit of the institution is composed of persons differing in nationality, quality of education, and habit of thought, the Library ought to contain expositions of every view of questions interesting to the public, and of every phase of opinion, in all languages: moreover that means of reference to the works of contemporary writers of the most active minds in all parts of the world ought to be found on the shelves.

True to the now largely forgotten realities of nineteenth-century Victoria this was a "multicultural" collection, even if English-language material predominated in practice, as was natural. The selection of works for inclusion in the holdings was based on many sources and references, amongst others "the Catalogues of the British Museum, the Universities and College Libraries of the Mother Country, and of similar institutions on the Continent of Europe", "the authorities cited in the Notes to such works as Burton, Gibbon, Hume, Montaigne" and "the Catalogues and Trade Circulars of the Booksellers of best repute in all the Capitals of Europe and America". The first fruit of this research was the list compiled under Barry's direction and appended to his letter of instructions on 3 December 1853 to the Victorian Agent-General in London.<sup>3</sup> French authors figure in its various subject categories in considerable numbers, for example Buffon, Cuvier, Daubenton, Candolle, Jussieu, Lamarck, Levaillant, La Pérouse, Mirabeau, Arago, Urbain Le Verrier (the

astronomer great-uncle of the Australian barrister Francis Leverrier)<sup>4</sup>, Laplace, Maupertuis, Denon, Montfaucon, Tocqueville, De Thou, Lamartine, Guizot, Thiers, Joinville and Sully.

Over the next three decades the policy was maintained, not least through the donations solicited from foreign governments and institutions. In the preface to the *Supplemental Catalogue of 1865* (also reprinted in 1880) Barry noted (p. xxvi):

The Emperor of the French has enriched the collection with a Second Donation even more varied and important than that with which he was on a former occasion pleased to honor the Institution, and the Consul-General of His Imperial Majesty has, with a kindness natural to a person of his extended travel and learning, offered his assistance to render more perfect the roll of French authors at present found within the walls.

The Consul-General in question was Francis de Castelnau. By the time the 1880 catalogue was published, he had died and the Library had received the legacy of his scientific collection, some 424 volumes and 429 pamphlets (p. liii). The statistics on donations record the receipt of 302 volumes from Napoleon III in the 1860s (p. xlix). The detail of this is set out in the volume the Library produced in 1873 to record its indebtedness to donors.<sup>5</sup> There are some substantial sets like 71 volumes of the *Revue contemporaine* from 1852 to 1863, 6 volumes of the *Moniteur des Communes*, 1852-1857, 4 volumes of the *Œuvres complètes de l'Empereur Napoléon III*, 1854-1856, and 13 folio volumes of the *Galleries historiques de Versailles*, 1838, but other items, all of them from the nineteenth century and mostly contemporary, seem to have been chosen more or less at random. Anybody familiar with the way French governments have supported publishers from the Ancien Régime through to the Fifth Republic by subscribing for up to 100 copies of a wide variety of titles will recognize the mechanism in play. This was the Second Empire's equivalent of the "Dépôt du Roi" of Louis XVI.<sup>6</sup> The accessions were none the less welcome additions to Melbourne's bibliographical resources. When C. W. Holgate reported on his 1884 visit to Australian libraries, his only serious reservation about the collections of an institution with "a history of progress quite unparalleled in the annals of modern Libraries" concerned "works relating to the language, literature, and history of Germany" and not that country's Western neighbour.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the crash of 1892, the economic crisis of the 1930s and the effects of two world wars, the Library took a long time to abandon its quasi-universal collecting aspirations. Consequently it is possible to point to significant French acquisitions—by purchase or by gift—for a substantial part of last century. Some of the most notable of them were exhibited in July–August 1989, but the Revolution was by no means the only focus of this effort. A certain opportunism, as at some of the major Melbourne book auctions in the nineteenth century, was still possible, for example during and after the Second World War when traditional markets were, to say the least, dislocated. Surprises of all sorts await the user of the Library, but it is undeniable that its primacy in this country passed in the late 1950s and the 1960s to the National Library of Australia and to the University of Sydney. The State Library of New South Wales is a special case bolstered by the Mitchell and Dixson legacies, although its good fortune in obtaining some of the books owned by J. J. Quinn, Brennan's friend and editor, and by Paul Wenz has maintained its presence in the French field.

The measure of the State Library of Victoria's commitment to France is to be found in recent published collection policies. The latest, issued in September 2001,<sup>8</sup> is not encouraging for students of French. Using the Australian *Conspectus* methodology it assesses current collecting levels, acquisition commitments and goal levels. French literature is classified 2F (p. 66), that is "Basic Information", "principally English language material, but with a selection of material in other languages". This is, it could be added, hardly adequate as a description of the older holdings. French language fares no better. Future intentions, even in areas of comparative strength, are summed up in similar ways:

Works on the French Revolution, written or translated into English, are collected at *Conspectus* Level 2 (p. 59).

In general Australia and New Zealand are the only areas collected at the 4 (Research) and 5 (Comprehensive) Levels. The best other fields can hope for is Level 3 (Study or Instructional Support), with some rare exceptions like the First World War (Level 4). Without doubt this is resigned realism in the face of severe budgetary constraints and the Library's primary commitment to Victoria, Australia and our region. None the less it is disappointing that a major accumulation of nineteenth-century imprints (estimated at 300,000 volumes) across a very wide range of subjects is not being allowed to sup-

port continuing study and research because it is not being added to at a more satisfactory level, say 3c (Advanced Study).

Is this another example of what I have taken to denouncing as the New Parochialism?<sup>9</sup> The disease is, alas, widespread, as the international debate about the discarding of hard-copy newspapers in the Northern Hemisphere amply demonstrates. Yet the points made by David McKitterick in a recent volume on this problem are just as applicable to our situation:

To confuse historical patrimony (one of the accepted responsibilities of a national library) with local publishing is nonsense. To attempt to define a national printed archive by equating it with a supposed list of what is published in a country is nonsense. And to equate what is published in a particular country, either today or in the future, with what is of direct interest or relevance to that country is also nonsense.<sup>10</sup>

There are very good reasons—and not least the wavering commitment of local universities—for trying to maintain the French thrust of the State Library's holdings.

Fortunately collection policies can change, especially if outside donors alter institutions' budgetary possibilities. The State Library has access, particularly through its Foundation, to some discretionary funds for its Special Collections. The section on the "Rare Books Collection" in the 2001 *Collection Development Policy* (pp. 149–151) is anything but parochial and therefore a positive step towards recognizing "the context in which the early exploration and settlement of Australia were undertaken" and the significance of "books as artefacts". In the past twelve months two special purchases have demonstrated that French books can still be seen as part of the Library's mission.

At the Antiquarian Booksellers' Fair in Melbourne in November 2002 a copy of André Félibien's *Description de la grotte de Versailles* (Paris, de l'Imprimerie royale, par Sébastien Mabre-Cramoisy, 1679, broadside), which had been in Australia for some time (in a private collection and then in the trade) was offered for sale. This plate volume was in a contemporary red morocco binding "à la dentelle du Louvre" for gifts made by Louis XIV.<sup>11</sup> As an artefact, as a testimony to the artistic and garden culture of Versailles and as an important part of our Western heritage the book needed to be kept in Melbourne.<sup>12</sup> The State Library did what was necessary for the common good.

Earlier this year, with the help of the State Library Foundation, a set of the four-volume folio *Fables choisies, mises en vers par J. de La Fontaine* (Paris, Desaint, Saillant & Durand, 1755–1759) was acquired from France. Since no copy of this major illustrated book of the eighteenth century had been held in Australia, it was good that one in a contemporary binding became available at an affordable price. With 276 plates engraved after Oudry, the *Fables choisies* represent a significant addition to the Library's resources in art history as well as in literature. Beyond this, the complex process by which the work was published, then reissued, by subscription is of considerable interest to more than one local researcher. Having access to an original is, as always, crucial in this sort of investigation.

The rush towards making texts electronic has obscured what continues to make institutions like the State Library of Victoria indispensable. We still need collections of original materials, whatever the medium, to support many kinds of research. There will no doubt be fewer such libraries, as a premonitory paper by Terry Belanger asserted more than a decade ago.<sup>13</sup> However, it is clear that State or national repositories of legal-deposit books, pamphlets, newspapers and all the rest must maintain their role as centres for conservation and consultation under optimum conditions. It is likely that they will increasingly be called upon to perform the same services for our holdings of European, Asian and American imprints of earlier periods.

A key responsibility brings with it obligations. A great deal has happened at the State Library since I worked there in the winter of 1962 on a union list of books and journals of French interest.<sup>14</sup> Redevelopment of the Swanston Street site with the whole of the old complex passing to the Library has created exciting new spaces to be occupied in late 2003 and beyond. None the less the Government of Victoria still has to provide adequate, i.e. purpose-built, offsite storage for the collections, which are, after all, the Library's *raison d'être*. A considerable effort also has to be made to see that there are enough specialist professional librarians and conservators to develop and maintain a great diversity of materials and to give guidance to users. The challenge is there, and, after five decades of enormous difficulties for the Library, it must be taken up.

The rewards are potentially substantial, and they will flow from the confidence of donors. With plans already under discussion for a biennial Rare Book School in Melbourne—starting in 2006—there is an obvious part for the State Library to play alongside Monash University's Centre for the Book and similar bodies. In that context it makes sense for the Library to

develop aspects of its French collection in collaboration with those universities that are still involved in the field. It is high time to renegotiate plans for co-operative acquisition that were first drawn up in the 1960s.

For a simple-minded reader the fact that statues of St George and the Dragon and of Joan of Arc stand outside the building behind Redmond Barry is an invitation to expect two great European cultures to be well represented inside. If the promise is genuine, one begins to wonder how one can help...

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#### Notes

1. The bibliographical details of the separate earlier issue are: *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité: Pages from the Revolution. An Exhibition to Celebrate the Bicentennial of the French Revolution. The Queen's Hall, State Library of Victoria 10 July to 16 August 1989*, Catalogue by Wallace Kirsop, Melbourne, Council of the State Library of Victoria & Institute for the Study of French-Australian Relations, 1989, 20 pp.
2. *The Catalogue of the Public Library of Victoria*, Melbourne, the Trustees, 1880, 2 volumes, lxiv + 2084 pp.
3. *Early Book Purchases in the Melbourne Public Library: Redmond Barry's Instructions to the Agent-General December 3rd 1853*, with an introduction by Richard Overell, Monash University, The Ancora Press, 1997.
4. See *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 10: 1891-1939 *Lat-Ner*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1986, pp. 80-81.
5. *The Catalogue of Donations to the Public Library of Victoria, from 1856 to 1872*, Melbourne, Clarkson, Massina & Co., General Printers, 1873, pp. 69-73.
6. See Wallace Kirsop, "Pour une histoire bibliographique de la souscription en France au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle" in Giovanni Crapulli, ed., *Trasmissione dei testi a stampa nel periodo moderno*, vol. II: *Il Seminario internazionale Roma-Viterbo 27-29 giugno 1985*, Rome, Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1987, pp. 255-282, esp. p. 280.
7. C. W. Holgate, *An Account of the Chief Libraries of Australia and Tasmania*, London, C. Whittingham and Co., Chiswick Press, 1886, pp. 15-20.
8. State Library of Victoria, *Collection Development Policy*, Melbourne, State Library of Victoria, 2001.
9. E.g. in Wallace Kirsop, "'The Finest Private Library in Australia': John Macgregor's Collection", *The La Trobe Journal*, n° 69, Autumn 2002, pp. 30-38, esp. p. 37.

10. "Introduction" in David McKitterick, ed., *Do We Want to Keep Our Newspapers?*, London, Office for Humanities Communication, King's College, London, 2002, pp. 12-13.
11. See the illustration of these bindings in *L'Art du livre à l'Imprimerie nationale*, Paris, Imprimerie nationale, 1973, p. 7.
12. A detailed account of this work and of its first edition in this format (1676) can be found in Dora Wiebenson & Claire Baines, *The Mark J. Millard Architectural Collection*, vol. I: *French Books Sixteenth through Nineteenth Centuries*, Washington, National Gallery of Art; New York, George Braziller, 1993, pp. 180-182.
13. "Envoi: Meditations by the Captain of the Iceberg" in Peter Davison, ed., *The Book Encompassed: Studies in Twentieth-Century Bibliography*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 302-309.
14. See Roger Laufer & Brian Southwell, compilers, with the assistance of Wallace Kirsop, *French Culture in the Libraries of Melbourne: The State Library of Victoria; Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne; Monash University Library*, Clayton, Monash University, 1962, 2 volumes.