

# VISITING MAYFIELD

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Buildings associated with nineteenth-century French consuls in Victoria have not survived in such numbers that anybody interested in Castelnau, perhaps the most fascinating of all these officials, could afford to turn down the opportunity to inspect Mayfield, the Count's rural property in Mordialloc. Thus, when I received towards the middle of 2002 an invitation from the City of Kingston in conjunction with the Mordialloc and District Historical Society "to a public open day to celebrate and inspect Mordialloc's most famous rural mansion prior to its approved demolition later this year", I responded positively and duly made my way by train and on foot on Sunday 16 June to 282 Lower Dandenong Road. Apart from a brief glimpse of the house from nearby Fonceca Street a year or two before, I had never seen Castelnau's country residence, which had remained in the hands of his Brazilian mistress Carolina Fonceca d'Araujo and then of their second son Edward Fonceca until 1939. Having given two talks on the 1860s and 1870s Consul General to the Mordialloc Historical Society—in 1991 and 1996—I was well aware of local interest in the estate. In 1999 I provided information from my biographical researches on Francis Louis Nomparr de Caumont La Force, comte de Castelnau (?–1880) to Allom Lovell & Associates, who were preparing a preliminary assessment of the significance of Mayfield for the City of Kingston in the context of a proposed Heritage Overlay. In the event, as the 2002 invitation indicated, preservation of the fabric of Mayfield was not achieved. However, apart from the opportunity given by the present owners, the Specialised Vibrated Concrete Company, to interested parties to inspect the building and grounds last year, a detailed historical and architectural study was commissioned from Allan Willingham, with whom I was also happy to collaborate. Fairly soon this substantial report (*Mayfield at Mordialloc*: ISBN 0-9586931-3-7) will be available in selected repositories. At the time of writing the demolition was imminent.

The visit on 16 June 2002 was useful in a number of ways. Apart from walking round the perimeter of the Woodlands Golf Club, which occupies nearly half of the original property of more than 300 acres, I was able to take in the slightly exotic character of what was left of the garden close to Castelnau's house. How much he had contributed to this in his mere six years of ownership or indeed how much time he spent in Mordialloc remain open questions. What was quite clear, even to a casual observer, was how difficult it would be to restore and retain the house in this new century.

On a Sunday afternoon in particular, it was painfully obvious that the property was in the flight path of planes taking off from Moorabbin Airport immediately north of Lower Dandenong Road. The industrial estate already partly developed on Castelnau land seemed to be an inescapable future. In any case we are beginning to be conscious of the difficulties faced by house museums in all sorts of places in a world that is not tender for enterprises that cannot pay their way. In addition, although the house is not a small one—and here I draw on my acquaintance with rural dwellings in various parts of New South Wales between the 1930s and the 1960s—it is stretching a point or two to call it a mansion rather than a farmstead. Even modified over time it is in no sense comparable to the Italianate pseudo-palaces of the 1880s one still finds in respectable numbers in Melbourne suburbs closer in. Hence, although it is sad to see the disappearance of another of several buildings connected with Castelnau, we have to recognize that intellectual productions and artefacts like books, manuscripts and drawings may be a more important contribution to our heritage than the places where they were conceived. Castelnau's legacy to the Melbourne Public Library, the first important one it received, was of his scientific books. He was thus one of the builders of the French collections whose significance I have treated in the preceding article. In fact it was through volumes in this gift that I first became aware—decades ago—of the naturalist and explorer turned consular official after the 1848 Revolution.

In a future number of *Explorations* we hope to have an article by Allan Willingham on the various properties held by Castelnau and Carolina Fonceca in Victoria. Not all of them have disappeared or come under immediate threat of demolition. As well, I expect to offer a reasonably detailed account of my investigation of Castelnau's complicated life and career. It will not be the biography I project under the title "*That Accomplished Traveller*": *Francis de Castelnau* (the phrase is borrowed from the Public Library Trustees' minutes of appreciation of the 1880 legacy), but it will attempt to lay out both findings and persistent problems about a man who was at some pains to cover his tracks. In other words, the concern of *Explorations* with France's Victorian consuls will continue.

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