

MELBOURNE THROUGH FRENCH EYES: ANTOINE FAUCHERY

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Antoine Julien Nicolas Fauchery was born in Paris on 15 November, 1823.¹ Little is known of his early years, other than details, including the fact that "he was born without a patrimony",² recorded by the poet, Théodore de Banville, who seems to have been his closest friend. Banville met Fauchery in about 1844 when they were introduced by a mutual friend in a café in the Latin Quarter. He gives rather a romantic picture of the young Fauchery at their first meeting:

This very young man, slim and strong, with sparkling eyes, Olympian hair in frizzy disorder, a well-shaped arched nose, heroic eyebrows, thick, red, luminous, ironical, sensual lips shaded by a thick black moustache, a prominent chin, a neck as robust as that of the young Hercules, immediately excited my curiosity. He looked as if he belonged to that race of adventurous knights who, ever since the days of Parsifal and Arthur, set forth every year to win the Grail, and who would no doubt bring it back if they did not spend the best part of this time freeing princesses in distress...³

Banville recalls Fauchery's efforts at a number of careers:

Do I need to tell you that he began by being a very bad pupil?... At fourteen, he was mad on architecture... He would have liked to continue at Cologne the gigantic, unfinished cathedral... and to terminate at Strasbourg the immortal church begun by the great Herwyn. By good hap, another demon had come along, the demon of painting. Now Fauchery's new gods were Titian, Rubens and Veronese...⁴

At about the same time as his meeting with Banville, Fauchery also met a number of other prominent writers in the Bohemian circle, including Henry Murger, Champfleury, Auguste Vitu, Charles Baudelaire, and Gérard de Nerval among others, all of whom began their literary careers contributing to a popular journal, *Le Corsaire-Satan*.⁵ Some time later, Fauchery left his unsatisfactory work as, by now, a wood engraver and enthusiastically embraced his true vocation of a writer. From 1845-1848, he contributed a number of articles to *Le Corsaire-Satan* and at this time formed a close friendship with Nadar, friend of Banville and Baudelaire, and the greatest of the early French photographers.

In 1848, Nadar decided to join a band of idealists, mostly French and *émigré* Poles, who were about to leave Paris to liberate Poland. He set out on 30 March in company with his younger brother Adrien and his friend Fauchery. They had only reached Strasbourg when the difficulties of this tragi-comedy

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began, since they were completely without funds. Early in May, the troop had reached Magdeburg in Prussia where they were stopped and interned for a short time. Orders were soon given for their repatriation and by 1 June they were back in Paris. Banville describes their reunion;

One evening, among others, at the Café de Buci, we were talking for the thousandth time, and still with the same feeling of anguish, when suddenly, like a very thunderbolt, we saw and felt, falling into our arms with tears, embracing us like brothers, not Fauchery and Nadar, but, as their passports said, *Nadarski* and *Faucheriski*.⁶

Fauchery was immortalized in Henry Murger's *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème* on which the opera *La Bohème* is based, since according to Banville, Murger had used him as a model for the character of the painter, Marcel:

Antoine Fauchery, a handsome young man, spiritual and charming, whom Murger had tried to depict in his Marcel of *La vie de Bohème*, was the most lively among the friends of our youth.⁷

During the next four years until 1852, he wrote a number of serials, pamphlets and short plays for publication in the journals *Le Corsaire*, the *Journal pour rire*, *Dix Décembre* and *L'Événement*, and broadsheets on various subjects were also attributed to him at this time.

After this short creative period as a writer, Fauchery once again submitted to the call of adventure, and on 23 July, 1852, he sailed from London on board the *Emily*, bound for Port Phillip where he hoped to make his fortune on the Victorian goldfields.

Fauchery spent nearly four years in Australia on this occasion, and he recounted the events he experienced and his observations of life in the colony in his "Lettres d'un mineur en Australie" which were serialised in 1857, in fifteen instalments in the Paris newspaper *Le Moniteur Universel*.⁸ Later in 1857 these letters were published in Paris by Poulet-Malassis and de Broise, the publishers of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*.⁹ It was not until 1965 that the work was translated by Professor A.R. Chisholm and published in Melbourne as *Letters from a miner in Australia* by Georgian House,¹⁰ and it is from this edition that I will quote today.

Of his arrival in the embryonic city of Melbourne, after frustrating and irritating delays during the voyage, he wrote: "The enormous number of newcomers to this little capital makes it an impossible place to stay in. Neither gold nor silver would get you a room there"¹¹... "Fortunately, one of the porters who is battling for my custom, speaks French [...] I gather that my man knows an Irishwoman who has a room to let. We go up a very straight and very long street and arrive at the lady's place. She is drunk, and tells me a fine story in her

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native patois, crosses herself, and installs me in a loft, along with five people stretched out on the floor on palliasses. — All this for three pounds a week (75 francs). — 'It's given away,' says my guide as he takes six francs for his run."¹²

Fauchery concentrates very much on the enormous cost of everything, from "an entrance-tax for the town"¹³ to vastly overpriced food and accommodation. As he passes an inn in Bourke Street, it amuses him that he would have earned a huge salary "at the *Black Bull* hotel, where they are offering 500 francs a week for a *French cook*!"¹⁴ On the first morning after his arrival, he says:

I see the town and there witness, when I woke up, a none too entertaining spectacle. Behind the wall of the prison built at the top of the hill, they were hanging a gentleman guilty of murdering his work-mate on the road to the mines. The crowd was dense round the gallows, erected on a platform about twenty feet high, and ladies were handing each other, turn about, binoculars and field glasses, so as to miss nothing as they watched the victim's face. This poor wretch, clad in a grey costume and wearing a white cotton bonnet, arrived on the platform following the executioner, who led him under the cross-beam set horizontally across two uprights, with the rope dangling from the middle of it; then he tied the fatal knot round his neck, tightening it violently, and pulled his bonnet down to his chin. Next the minister, who was standing at the top of the ladder, opened a book and read a last prayer. This reading lasted for a good three minutes at least, during which time the condemned man, with his hands tied behind his back, stood firm and motionless, with no shaking at the knees. Only his fingers were shaking convulsively, and under the tight-drawn tissue of the cotton bonnet, of a cruel, dead white colour, one could follow all the grimaces and anxieties of that face! [...] As the clergyman's final word was uttered a trap-door opened, the man disappeared suddenly behind the wall, and after that one could see nothing but the rope swinging in space.

He describes life in the city:

Whereas I had expected to find wooden houses, huts even, hastily erected and scattered among the trees, I found houses of one or two storeys, solidly built, aligned as straight as a die, forming streets a kilometre long, very straight, silk dresses, heeled boots, everything just as in Europe, everything including even barrel organs [...] During the winter, which is marked by torrential rains, the water, rushing from three sides

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at once into this funnel, inundates the heart of the place, and not only interrupts traffic, invades shops and cellars, but even kills people, as is proved by the following notice, which says with laconic simplicity: *Another child drowned in the streets of Melbourne* [...]

The most phenomenal and rapid fortunes are made by the *Publicans* (those who are authorised to keep a public-house). In English countries, and particularly in the colonies, the public-house is simultaneously a hotel, a restaurant, a café and a tavern. — The fortunate proprietor of these four establishments rolled into one is dependent upon the municipal authorities, and has obtained his licence by soliciting more people, weaving more webs of intrigue than would be needed anywhere else to become viceroy of a large province. None of these establishments is commended by its aristocratic bearing. It resembles at one and the same time the shops of our liquor vendors and certain houses of ill fame in the former Rue Pierre Lescot. You can imagine, after that, what the public-house must be like in Melbourne, the sole resort of the nomadic population, three quarters of which are made up of ship's deserters, ex-convicts and Irish beggars [...].

Drunkenness and fisticuffs being perpetual to these places, people with peaceful habits avoid them. [...] the municipal authorities have allowed migrants without means to form a temporary encampment. Thus any family that has at its disposal a few yards of canvas has the right to install itself as it likes, either in the north or the south; providing, none the less, that it pays in advance a fee of five shillings a week levied by the very paternal government of the colony for a tent-site in CANVAS-TOWN.

Canvas-Town! a floating city devoured by the sun, inundated by the rain and swept away by the wind when the latter is in one of its bad moods! [...] Amid the grass you bump into a strange medley of people and things, and breathe in the acrid perfumes of a bivouac through the smoke of which carefree children chase each other with shrill cries, while tall, stiff gentlemen remain impassive amidst the first collapsing of their golden dream, and the ladies, those incorrigible ladies, starched up to the neck, busy themselves with their household cares in their everlasting flimsy dresses, always with three flounces! [...]

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[...] You turn into a street, any street, — they all look alike, — and gaze about attentively: if a square building — they are always square — is a few yards higher than the others, rest assured that it is a church or else a public-house [...].

But assuredly the most fantastic building of all is the barracks, where a battalion of the 40th regiment is said to be quartered. I confess that upon [...] examining the two long parallel huts wherein are concentrated all the regular forces of Melbourne, I could discover only one uniform [...] — I saw only one, who was on guard duty at the gate, and even then he was wearing slippers and a nightcap, and smoking his pipe. — I shall not dwell on this slight negligence in costume and bearing, which would perhaps annoy some of our sergeant-majors. Enough to say that my infantryman, clad in a red coat with white facings and the piping on his trousers, had the main insignia of his rank and calling: — a rifle. At any rate, everything leads me to believe that the rifle relegated to the corner of a wall was none other than his [...].

To the left, to the right, everywhere are the same cold faces, the same stiff, starched gaits, the same black coats, like those of undertakers' men. On the blond hair of the thoroughbred gentleman as on that of the mason plastering his wall you find the same little British-style silk hat, with flat brim, high crown and short nap, which is as tightly attached to the skull as the hand is to the arm, and is part of the individual. Now, if you expect a smile from those pale lips, if you look for a gleam in those icy, lack-lustre blue eyes, it will be like asking the head to separate itself from the hat or the hat to separate itself from the head.¹⁵

One senses Fauchery's cultural shock after the sophistication of Paris. He is alternately fascinated and appalled by life in Melbourne and stays there for only a few days before setting out for Heidelberg where he has heard of a French priest, known only as "Father B.",¹⁶ who gives Fauchery much background information on political and social events in Australia's history in the only day they spend together.

After working for twenty-two months at Ballarat, Fauchery, becoming despondent, "sold half [his] share to a speculator", the payment not even covering his expenses: "all my savings, eaten up by seven months' useless work!",¹⁷ and turns his back on Ballarat.

On his return to Melbourne in 1856 after this long absence at the diggings, Fauchery reflects on the social changes he observed in the developing city:

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I found Melbourne modified, practically transformed. Canvas Town and the bazaar on the banks of the Yara-Yara [sic] no longer existed. The government had replaced the canvas city with vast, spacious board huts for the use of newcomers with no resources. Philanthropic establishments such as *pawn-brokers* and *auction rooms*, in great numbers and usually kept by Jews, took under their roof the new and second-hand merchandise formerly displayed in the open. The town had developed, the shops had grown bigger, the takings in the hotels and public houses had increased tenfold. Two theatres, elegantly constructed, one for dramas, the other for equestrian feats, had replaced the old "circus", that modest tent in which I had heard the Ethiopian harmonists from the Gaité theatre, delighting the colonial audience. In the streets, the blue and red shirts, the muddy trousers and the big gendarme-boots had become rare, and the consideration once accorded to this costume now seemed to be given entirely to black coats and white collars. The miners themselves, coming down from the mines, hastened instinctively and unanimously to shed the dusty livery of labour, to rank as citizens by putting on the garb of the *regular gentleman*.¹⁸

Fauchery had not had great success on the goldfields, returning to Melbourne with only 60 pounds in his pocket, and

The idea occurred to me of founding a Café Estaminet Français. I knew of a French billiard table for sale in a bric-a-brac shop, and hurried off to bargain about it. How much? — 60 pounds! — I offered 30 pounds down and the rest in six weeks' time. Agreed. The dealer would, I think, have liked to throw his arms around my neck, so glad was he to get rid of a valueless article, the English not liking to play on our billiard tables, which, in their shape, differ a little from theirs. — I went further on to buy four little deal tables, some benches of the same material, a big coffee-pot, some glasses and plates; a simple, second-hand set of kitchen gear; and then... well, that's all.

[...] My prospectuses, set out in the required terms: BIL- LIARDS, SOFAS, LUNCHEs, COLD SUPPERS, followed by the famous traditional phrase: *You can play pool!* produced on the spot a profound impression. The day my establishment was opened, I had people in the room, in the yard and even in the stable, everywhere except under the tables. Many custo-

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mers were sitting on the floor, and nearly all were drinking from the same glass. I restocked my cellar four times in the course of the evening, and next day I had enough money in the till to buy all the corkscrews in Melbourne [...]. My house had become the rendezvous of all foreigners.

In this modest ground-floor establishment, whose inside appearance I had improved little by little, but in which none the less they still played billiards by candle-light, I saw many people come in who became friends: ships' captains of the Bordeaux shipping trade, artists from all countries; even consuls, the Consul for France excepted. Count Moreton de Chabillant [sic] and I were on very good terms, but he would never come to taste my famous coffee, on the grounds that I had too many deserting sailors coming there. I also had, once only, a visit from the Heidelberg vicar, my old friend Father B. He drank a tiny drop of Grande Chartreuse, but did not consent to be received anywhere else than in the yard.

Regrettably, the venture was not a success, since Melbourne passed through a financial crisis causing bankruptcies and widespread unemployment. There was little activity on the goldfields, bitter protestation against the tax imposed on miners, the Eureka Stockade and martial law. Fauchery has no sympathy for those responsible:

It took no less than 3,000 regular troops, sent in great haste from all parts of the colony to the scene of the insurrection, the proclamation of martial law in the whole of the Ballarat district, and four big guns to quell the riot. This deplorable conflict had a fatal effect on public opinion. It was thought for a long time that the insurgents' ulterior motive was political revolution, aiming at independence for the district of Victoria and the establishment of a republic.

This latter apprehension was not likely to calm worried minds in town. I, who as a foreigner had no concern with it all, could only contemplate sadly my customers' desertion. It was like a fever; they were all leaving me to go up to the mines, some out of curiosity, many others by necessity, to seek what Melbourne would not give them: wages. Day after day the empty seats round my marble tables — they were marble ones now — became more noticeable. For hours on end I used to reckon up how many small cups of coffee went into the making up of all this luxury to which I had sacrificed everything, and which I alone, from now on, was to enjoy. I

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tried the elasticity of my sofas, I listened to the sound of my clock, I counted the golden flowers, with a background of emerald velvet, on the magnificent paper, costing one pound a roll.

One fine morning I sold my stock in trade after following very honorably, for two or three years, a calling that was... dull, but productive.

[...] It was then that two of my good friends, whose names are most justly esteemed in Melbourne, Gustave Coursier and Adet, came to my assistance. These young Bordeaux merchants, dealers in wines, spirits, tinned foods and groceries [...] were struggling, like everyone else, against the bad state of the market [...] They proposed that I should take half of these goods, which I would take to the mines, and with which I should set up a small store. They would not hear of any terms of settlement. I would pay my debt when I could.

I mention this most gracious and disinterested fact, inasmuch as such facts are usually rare, even in the colonies, and especially between compatriots.²⁰

Neither was this a successful venture, and Fauchery returned to Melbourne prior to his departure for France in 1856. He obviously looks forward to his return to Paris, saying that "I shall perhaps look back with regret at life on the diggings. But I shall not regret Melbourne" which, despite shops, gas lighting and "five new theatres", still lacks sophistication since "the company made up of people from all countries, sings the same opera in French, English, German and Italian, each man singing in his own language! — I pity the conductor if he is a musician — which is not highly probable".²¹

So ended Fauchery's first visit to this country. He returned to Melbourne to establish himself as a brilliant photographer in 1857. But that's another story!

*LaTrobe Library, State Library
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Notes

1. Registre de la Paroisse de Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois, Paris. Table alphabétique des baptêmes faits en 1823.
2. Antoine Fauchery, *Letters from a miner in Australia*, translated by A.R. Chisholm, Melbourne, Georgian House, 1965, p. xix.
3. Ibid., p. xii.
4. Ibid., p. xiv.
5. *Le Corsaire-Satan*, popular literary journal, most of its contributors being Bohemians.
6. Fauchery, *Letters*, p. xviii.
7. Théodore de Banville, *Odes funambulesques*, Paris, Alphonse Lemerre, 1867, p. 354. (My translation)
8. "Lettres d'un mineur en Australie", *Le Moniteur Universel*, Paris, 9 January – 5 February, 1857.
9. Antoine Fauchery, *Lettres d'un mineur en Australie*, Paris, Poulet-Malassis & de Broise, 1857.
10. Fauchery, *Letters*.
11. Ibid., p. 21.
12. Ibid., p. 23.
13. Loc.cit..
14. Ibid., p. 32.
15. Ibid., p. 36.
16. Ibid., p. 36.
17. Ibid., p. 81.
18. Ibid., pp. 83-4.
19. Ibid., pp. 86-7.
20. Ibid., pp. 89-90.
21. Ibid., p. 105.