

PAUL MERRUAU'S *LES CONVICTS EN AUSTRALIE*  
(PARIS, HACHETTE, 1853; COLLECTION: BIBLIOTHEQUE  
DES CHEMINS DE FER)

JACQUES H. POLLET DE SAINT-FERJEUX

Although I discussed with Dr Davison and Dr Nettelbeck my contribution to this France-Victoria Connection meeting, they are in no way responsible for my choice of Merruau's book which Ferguson dismissed in two short sentences: "The work contains historical mistakes. It is fictional in character."<sup>1</sup>

Taking Ferguson's criticism for granted, I will attempt to show that Merruau's book, for all its shortcomings (and even if it be judged a piece of hackwriting), is one of the more interesting accounts written in French of Australian life in the first half of the nineteenth century, and that it is still relevant today. If we have enough time left for a discussion, I would also like to get help from the audience to try to assess how many copies of the book have survived. Ferguson<sup>2</sup> mentioned only six copies, Gaston Renard<sup>3</sup> over the years mentioned only two copies, Thornton-Smith<sup>4</sup> has not listed it, Politzer<sup>5</sup> did not include it, and it was not part of the display of "The French Presence in Victoria (1800-1901)".<sup>6</sup>

In order to judge this book with fairness one has to bear in mind the audience that Paul Merruau was addressing. *Les convicts en Australie* was written specifically for the Bibliothèque des Chemins de Fer (B.C.F.).<sup>7</sup> This goes a long way to explaining the first shortcoming of the book: B.C.F. classified it in the sub-section "Voyages".<sup>8</sup> Probably because of that the style of the book is a direct, autobiographical narrative, with the use of the first-person, singular pronoun. Yet it is quite obvious that, as Ferguson points out: "It is fictional in character". For instance, on page 46, the first-person narrator is called "Georges" (not "Paul"), and on page 79 our (supposedly French) narrator Paul/Georges now claims to be one of the "loyaux Anglais" toasting the Queen. Incidentally Merruau himself (maybe consciously) gives away his subterfuge when he honestly lists his "INDICATION DES PRINCIPAUX OUVRAGES CONSULTES PAR L'AUTEUR".<sup>9</sup>

The other problem mentioned by Ferguson (the "historical mistakes") should not bother us too much considering such mistakes are always possible in any "contemporary" account.<sup>10</sup> What is rather more annoying is Merruau's practice of suppressing or altering many names, as this makes it almost impossible to check. For instance, the episode of convict Barrington rescuing the Albermarle from mutiny (pages 13-4) is probably one of these mistakes mentioned by Ferguson.<sup>11</sup> However other examples cannot be checked at all, such as the sacking of the judge (pages 65-6) as Merruau doesn't give the name of the judge. Also annoying are cases where the names probably have been altered,

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(e.g. Tolmer (page 217), therefore making it useless to attempt tracing for instance in Manning Clark's index to Vols 1, 2, 3, and 4 (1788-1888).<sup>12</sup>

The last shortcoming of the book (not mentioned by Ferguson) is to be torn between two irreconcilable aims: on the one hand the travelogue approach with the obvious purpose of providing some light entertainment for the patrons of the B.C.F.,<sup>13</sup> on the other hand the deeper involvement of the writer in more philosophical issues about punishment in general, and the convict system in particular. Judging by the titles of the B.C.F., the cultural level of the readers must have been rather high. Authors like Michelet (Annexe, page 5), Balzac and Lamartine (annexe, p. 6), Pushkin and Gogol (annexe, p. 7) represent contemporaries. Classics published by the B.C.F. include Plato and Froissart. At the other extreme there was also lighter reading to while away the long time spent in a railway carriage. I am tempted to guess that Paul Merruau was asked to write for the lighter publishing but was unable to refrain from forcing his own philosophical observations into his text, ending up with an odd mixture of profundity and trivia. Moreover, having been a journalist for a long time,<sup>14</sup> he probably paid more attention to the description of each separate incident, rather than their interconnection, ending up with nine interesting tales rather than a real book made of nine properly connected chapters.

In spite of all these shortcomings, I claim that this book deserves survival in the context of Australian culture for at least three reasons: firstly, it does attempt to analyze the convict mentality rather than merely retelling the story of the convict state. Secondly, it attempts to analyze the mechanics of punishment rather than the philosophies/prejudices of the time about punishment. Thirdly, Merruau is very good at recreating the atmosphere of a far-away land that he hasn't seen.<sup>15</sup>

Let us see a few examples which illustrate the first two points. Merruau's ambivalent attitude to the convicts shows an inner tension between realism and decency:

[...] et je ne pus, sans un sentiment pénible, voir ces hommes conduits comme des animaux au marché. Je déteste la fausse philanthropie, la sentimentalité et les déclamations, et pourtant j'éprouvai [...] une impression très pénible [...] (page 6).

Later on, he is relieved when the chains are removed on board the ship (page 17), but he is also aware that, in the comparative freedom on board, the hardened convicts only corrupt the others (pages 38-41). And if you have only the hardened convicts together, as was the case in Norfolk Island, then you end up with Hell on earth (pages 94-7) ending in complete sadism: "Les souffrances des uns semblaient au contraire faire la joie des autres" (page 191). Merruau describes the convict system without sympathy yet he does not dismiss it completely as he hasn't got an alternative. Even the experiments in rehabilitation

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(by Campbell, the liberal-minded surgeon) are described as only moderately successful: they cost Campbell money (page 114), and they don't remove the problem of alcoholism among convicts (pages 129-38). Last but not least, Merruau describes the bushrangers very realistically. In his book they are no knights of the bush, he describes them as misfits without hope, occasionally buffooning some of their dreams (e.g. Bob's pretensions to gentlemanliness, page 181) but more usually hunted down like wild pigs.

The third point is still more interesting. Although the book, according to its title, is supposed to be on "the convicts" wherever "in Australia", one suspects that one of Merruau's deeper (unavowed) concerns was to recreate the atmosphere of Sydney in the first half year of the nineteenth century in a way somehow similar to Victor Hugo's re-creation of the atmosphere of medieval Paris in *Notre-Dame de Paris*.<sup>16</sup> Indeed Merruau's description of Sydney's Rocks underworld (pages 99-103)<sup>17</sup> is very reminiscent of "la cour des miracles" in *Notre-Dame de Paris*, and the end of Michel Howe (page 218) and particularly the murder of his Aboriginal mistress, also ring of Hugo-esque romanticism. Without achieving the same impact as Hugo of course, Merruau nonetheless manages to convey what it would have been like for a sailor to reach the sin-city of the South Pacific after several months of dreary sailing. We are all familiar with the expression "marvellous Melbourne" coined to describe the shallow magnificence of the capital of gold and speculation in the second half of the nineteenth century. Yet we rarely imagine that, although on a much smaller scale, in the first half of the same century (before the carving of China, the building of the French colonial empire and the awakening of Japan), far-away Sydney must have been another marvellous city of shallow magnificence and unrepentant corruption providing pleasure for the passing sailor and easy social mobility for the staying adventurer. If we were to indulge in the masochistic intellectual exercise which the French call an "explication de texte", perhaps the passage that would best deserve such microscopic scrutiny would be this description of Sydney by Merruau (pages 114-5):

En Australie, le désert commence à la sortie de Sydney. Ce pays offre le contraste le plus brusque de la civilisation à la barbarie, du mouvement et de l'immobilité, du bruit et du silence. La vie primitive y coudoie les existences les plus raffinées; les sauvages nus et affamés, rôdant autour de l'enceinte des habitations, voient luire le gaz et entendent sauter les bouchons du vin de Champagne.

Such a cruel description could make us think that Merruau was a cynic, but this is not the case: he finishes the same chapter (ch. 6, pages 112-25) with a rather pleasant description of the Australian countryside and of the work of graziers.

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One more problem has to be discussed before we can draw a conclusion. There is no doubt that Merruau's book is not a first-hand account of travels, and therefore the readership of the B.C.F. has been short-changed: a "fictional" travel-book is a contradiction in terms! Clearly for anyone who looks at it this way, Merruau has deceived his public and therefore his book should be considered as a valueless fraud, and this should be the end of the matter. However, I contend that there is a far more rewarding way of approaching this problem.

In history we accept that, running parallel to the work of the (academic) historian concerned with the reconstruction of the past, there is also the work of the writer of historical novels whose concern is not detailed reconstruction, but instead the "re-creation of the atmosphere" of the particular period he/she has chosen as the setting of the novel. I have already mentioned Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris*, but closer to us Marguerite Yourcenar is now receiving great recognition for such historical re-creations as *Les Mémoires d'Hadrien* and *L'Œuvre au noir*. Similarly we accept the value of re-creating in psychology: this time the purpose is no longer to re-create an "atmosphere" but rather a "state of mind". For instance the greatest merit of Patrick White in *The Vivisector* is to make us really feel *what it's like* to be a painter agonizing in his creative act.

If we accept that this achievement of some writers in "re-creating" is worthwhile and indeed a very taxing intellectual activity, the problem then is: why is it that in Geography/travels such "re-creating" (no matter how demanding, and no matter how well done!) is *not* acceptable, and in fact is usually considered a fraud? The answer is obvious: this is because there is no need for such re-creation. All you have to do is to send somebody there and to ask that person to bring back a first-hand account. Clearly this is what the B.C.F. should have done. One really wonders why they didn't! Should anybody ever undertake research-work on Merruau, his book and the B.C.F., I'll be interested to see the answer to this question. However let's come back to the way Merruau discharged the silly task of having to write a travel book "fictional in character". I think he did it very well considering the self-defeating nature of the project. My own conclusion is that if we forget about the silliness of it being a second-hand travel account, and just accept the text as it is, we end up enjoying reading a most unusual book written by a very intelligent man.

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### Notes

1. J.A. Ferguson, *Bibliography of Australia*, vol. VI: 1851-1900 H-P, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1965, p. 659.
2. Loc.cit. These copies are: Dixon, Ferguson, Mitchell, and State Libraries of South Australia, Tasmania and Western Australia. Add to this LaTrobe: I haven't had time to check it, but the librarian pencilled its number (s 364/M55) against the Ferguson entry.
3. Catalogue 122, 1979, p. 40; Catalogue 157, 1982, p. 37; Catalogue 180, 1984, p. 45. This includes the copy I have acquired.
4. Which is normal; see title *Analytical Checklist of First-Hand...* Merruau's book is not a first-hand account. See below passim.
5. L.L. Politzer, *Bibliography of French Literature on Australia 1595-1946*, Melbourne, privately printed, [1952].
6. From 4 December, 1984. See catalogue.
7. This is quite certain, as there is no record of any publishing done outside this particular collection. See *Catalogue général des livres imprimés de la Bibliothèque nationale*, or British Library and Library of Congress catalogues.
8. See page 6 of the annexe on the B.C.F..
9. See unnumbered page (presumably 237) at the end of the narrative. I haven't had the time to look up these references.
10. Paul Merruau would have been in his forties when he wrote the book, therefore he was writing about things that happened mostly during his own lifetime, and it is unfair to expect that he should have had the professional historian's hindsight.
11. Manning Clark doesn't mention any such event, although Barrington is mentioned in vol. I, pp. 99, 139 and 154. Similarly the Harrington meeting (Merruau, p. 85) is not to be found in the index of Clark's volumes I, II or III.
12. For more examples see Merruau, p. 101: Elizabeth Meredith (not indexed in Clark I, II, III) or Merruau, p. 190: Michel Howe (not indexed in Clark I, II, III, IV).
13. See, in annexe on B.C.F. p. 2 (at the end of the book): "Quelques voyages, dont le cadre sera fictif, mais dont tous les détails seront exacts, prendront place dans cette série."
14. See Pierre Larousse, *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, vol. XI, p. 93: Merruau.
15. I mean the "total atmosphere" in contradistinction to the faithfulness to details (much more about this below).
16. Written by Hugo in 1831.
17. Pp. 17 ff. in the 1926 McMillan abridged and edited edition (New York, 1926) of *Notre Dame de Paris*.