

‘THE BIGGEST THING IN YEARS’: MAX O’RELL’S LECTURE TOUR IN AUSTRALASIA

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For the last seven months and a half the Australian tour has been an uninterrupted series of successes. I shall have given 250 lectures in Australasia [...] without once disappointing an audience or myself. [My manager] says it was the biggest thing he has yet had in his thirty years’ experience.

When the French author Max O’Rell wrote this letter to his London publisher Andrew Tuer in December 1892,¹ he was nearing the end of his lecture tour of Australia and New Zealand. Paul Blouet, using the pseudonym Max O’Rell, was one of the great celebrities of the day, selling his books to huge audiences and gaining a reputation as one of the most entertaining lecturers in the English-speaking world. After completing the tour, O’Rell reworked his experiences in a travelogue entitled *John Bull & Co.: The Great Colonial Branches of the Firm*.²

Although O’Rell was in his time a figure of international note, there has been no analysis of his Australian journey, or of his activities in France, England and America.³ By tracing Max O’Rell’s lecture tour as closely as possible, this article aims firstly at examining his role as one of the major figures of the cross-cultural debate over manners and morals which agitated the British, American and French middle classes at the end of the nineteenth century. Secondly, it will identify the themes of this exchange as well as reveal its intensity. Finally it will demonstrate the significance of lecturing as a form of mass entertainment and a vehicle of the cross-national debate over manners and morals.

My research is based on Australian, American, New Zealand and English newspaper reports covering O’Rell’s tour, his literary account of the trip in book form and as a contribution to *La Revue de Paris*, as well as his personal correspondence. This article will make a contribution to our knowledge

and understanding of French–Australian relations at the end of the nineteenth century.

At forty-five, Max O'Rell was at the height of his career when he came to Australia. He was born as Paul Blouet into a French middle-class family in Avranches on the border between Normandy and Brittany in 1847. As an adolescent he moved to Paris where he attended the *collège* and the *conservatoire* before graduating from the Sorbonne (Faculté des Lettres). He then pursued a military career which led him to be involved in the Franco-Prussian war and then in the crushing of the Paris Commune in 1871. Injured, he turned to journalism. Lacking in talent or useful connections, he was aware that his prospects in the Parisian media were dim. He therefore left for London to become the foreign correspondent of a small Parisian newspaper. This did not turn out to be a success. In 1874 he accepted the post of French master at a prestigious London boys' college, St Paul's. He married an Englishwoman, Mary Bartlett, whom he had met as a fellow teacher.

In 1883, he published a humorous account of English society, *John Bull et son Ile* under the pseudonym Max O'Rell. This book became an immediate bestseller not only in Paris, but also in its translated form, *John Bull and his Island*, in London and even in the United States.

The popular success of O'Rell's *début* work was based on several factors. Firstly it was the account of a well-informed insider who had a sympathetic attitude to his subject. His criticisms were generally free of bitterness and hostility, a fact which was noted by Anglo-Saxon audiences particularly when compared to the earlier Hippolyte Taine's *Notes sur l'Angleterre*. Secondly, O'Rell had employed a new anecdotal, journalistic and witty style which corresponded to the needs of a newer and much larger class of travellers and other people exposed to cross-cultural contact. The culturally aware middle-classes formed this growing market for stereotyped but benevolent images of other Western societies.

John Bull and his Island went through at least 57 French editions in the first two years and sold roughly 750,000 copies. The book afforded its author immediate celebrity status which was duly exploited through the publication of a string of tomes on English women, on the French and English as neighbours, on Scots etc. Although these publications became increasingly shallow, they continued to sell and firmly established their author as an authority on cross-cultural differences in morals and manners.

O'Rell also took to the lecture platform which was an even more lucrative occupation, as he had a great talent as a performer. In his books and lectures, he crafted an image of himself as the Latin 'connoisseur' bridging cross-cultural differences through humour. When O'Rell put the impressions of his first American lecture tour⁴ on paper, he was offered a record sum by New York publishers Cassell for *Jonathan and his Continent* (1889) and received an even bigger sum for *Frenchman in America* (1890) in which he reworked the experiences of his second tour of the US.

After three successful American lecture tours, the French author began a tour of Canada, Australasia, India and South Africa. The tour had been arranged by the Melbourne-based impresario R.S. Smythe,⁵ who had travelled to London the previous year and engaged celebrities such as the explorer Henry M. Stanley and the pianist Paderewski. Smythe also organised Mark Twain's Australian lecture tour of 1895.⁶

For his Australian tour, Max O'Rell had prepared a series of five standard lectures under the umbrella title *Curious Nations I have met*. They were based on his bestselling books *John Bull and his Island*, *John Bull's Daughters*, *Friend MacDonald*, *Jonathan and his Continent*, *Our Dear Neighbours*. Besides the English, O'Rell also scrutinized *Sandy—or the Scotch at Home*. In *Jacques Bonhomme* he examined his native society and in *Yankees and Yankeedom* he presented his American travel impressions. The last 'curious nation' was Woman; the lecture entitled *Her Royal Highness Woman* had been a staple lecturing success for the previous seven years. Additionally, O'Rell had prepared *matinée* performances of *John Bull Junior* in which he talked about his experiences as a French teacher in a London boys' school.

O'Rell's strategy was to create what Mireille Rosello, in her discussion of stereotyping, has termed 'a pleasurable form of togetherness' by caricaturing the 'follies and eccentricities' of other societies. He extended an invitation to his audience to celebrate together their being 'normal'.⁷ His trademark was to carry stereotyping to a new level: he created the national stereotype as a literary character, an individual as a figurehead. John Bull, Jacques Bonhomme, Jonathan and Sandy became human beings, while incorporating the totality of their stereotypical national attributes. Their wives—Mrs John Bull, Mrs Jonathan and Jacqueline—were equally provided with varying national degrees of beauty, charm, wit and grace. The Australian prototype, however, had no particular name and was portrayed as an elongated version of John Bull—

skinny, with a sunburnt face and a broad-rimmed hat, a slow walk, extremely long legs and hanging arms.⁸

O'Rell did not limit himself to giving a visual portrait of the Australian type, he also provided an insight into the national character of Australians. The end of the nineteenth century was marked by an animated discussion about whether it was possible to describe the soul of a people. Mark Twain, who went on a similar lecture tour some years later and also left a travel account, dismantled the concept of national character: 'It is my belief that there are some "national" traits and things scattered about the world that are mere superstitions, frauds that have lived so long that they have the look of solid facts.'⁹ Twain then went on to the core of his argument, that it is impossible to 'generalise, psychologise and deduce' the character of a people. To get a grasp of the soul of a nation was, according to Mark Twain, only possible through unconscious absorption over many years, and only by the native novelist.

The French lecturer on the other hand deliberately catered to the growing market of readers who wanted a foreign nation explained, categorised, confirmed to be different, in order to situate themselves and their nation within the world. O'Rell defended the value of the representation of the character of another nation, as long as it was 'superficial, light, sympathetic, good-humoured and kindly'.¹⁰ He used the term 'impressions' and justified foreign travellers publishing their impressions of another country.

Max O'Rell's comments on the national variations of morals and manners were generally marked by a lack of hostility. His categorisations and generalisations of national character might be termed 'benevolent stereotype'. The depiction of little differences in culture and society, or of 'follies and foibles' as O'Rell called them, guaranteed safe entertainment. According to him, relations between major Western nations such as France, Britain and the United States had become an expression of friendly rivalry rather than of enmity. Although O'Rell's entertainments drew on the differences in manners and morals, they also served to assert his conviction that the foundations of culture binding these societies together were the same:

In feeling, in behaviour, in culture, and in refinement of manners there is no difference—none whatever—between an American gentleman and a gentleman from France, or any European country including Germany. Good society is good society everywhere.¹¹

The French lecturer had an agenda of cultural and political rapprochement between the principal Western nations. He was an active member of the Committee of the Entente Cordiale for Better Relations between England and France¹² and throughout his career he spoke out against nationalistic or war-mongering journalism in France, the United States and England.

O'Rell's most successful lecture was *Her Royal Highness, Woman*. Similarly to his stereotyped depictions of national character, O'Rell presented ready-made clichés of gender relations. Middle-class women formed a large part of the audience and 'thumped with their umbrellas on the floor to show their appreciation of the gallant Frenchman's high opinion of their sex'.¹³ The French lecturer's 'high opinion' of women consisted mostly of superficial flattery based on a conformist conception of gender difference. The title of his lecture already indicated that he had no intention of discussing feminism seriously. He found a ready audience for his assertion that women ruled men at home, exerting their power discreetly but overwhelmingly. By using catchy phrases such as 'Her Royal Highness Woman', 'female superiority' and the 'eternal feminine', he created an illusion of empowerment of women in the family and in society.¹⁴ From this he concluded that female suffrage or professional opportunities for women were unnecessary. The suffrage question was a burning issue in late nineteenth-century Australasia, with the vote granted to women in New Zealand in September 1893 and in South Australia in December 1894, only a short time after Max O'Rell toured the country. When asked for his opinion by a member of the audience in Dunedin, he replied: 'Women as a rule make men vote pretty well as they please'.¹⁵ He then entangled his female audience with the argument that truly beautiful women are content with their role as mothers and housewives. Feminists were ridiculed as unloved spinsters who threw themselves into social reform movements because they had no family to look after. O'Rell presented French women as the ideal: confidantes and partners of their husbands in business and family, they did not need to appear in the public sphere because they exerted their influence behind the scenes.

Lecturing in general, and O'Rell's lecturing activities in particular, have to be analysed as an important and underrated vehicle for the transnational debate over manners and morals. The enormously influential role of lecturing as a popular means of entertainment for the middle classes throughout the nineteenth century is not easy to comprehend today. Lecturing tours by celebrities have all but completely disappeared with the emergence of

audio-visual mass media, and it is only through an analysis of the newspaper coverage of lecture tours that we can grasp the important role they played in social debates throughout the nineteenth century. Particularly significant was the double function of lectures as entertainment and means of instruction. Lecturing scientists, historians, explorers, political and social activists as well as novelists and poets not only provided amusement but contributed to the education and social awareness of their audience. Max O'Rell classified himself as a humorous lecturer—deep insights into society or human nature were not expected of him. However, he considered it his mission to mediate between cultures, to explain particular national traits and to appease nationalism.

Several features specific to lecturing mark the particular significance of the lecture platform compared with written texts. Firstly was its immediacy—a lecturer as keen to entertain his audience as Max O'Rell was could guess from the reaction of his public if a particular line or argument was acceptable or not.¹⁶ Sometimes, a dialogue would actually ensue, as members of the audience not only showed their approval or disapproval, but also interjected comments. There are several instances reported in the press where remarks by O'Rell provoked reactions which he then responded to. The French lecturer took note of these discussions and adapted his subsequent performances accordingly. He knew, for instance, of the presence of a high percentage of Scottish or Irish born Australians and made sure not to be too sarcastic when talking about 'Sandy' or 'Pat'. He was aware that he was walking a tightrope—when caricaturing John Bull, Sandy, Pat, Jonathan, or women he had to know how far he could go with irony and when compliments were due. The reaction of the public helped him sound out where the balance between witty criticism and audience sensitivity was situated.

Another important aspect of lecturing was its lucrateness. A successful lecturer could command fees far exceeding any revenues that could be derived from books. Mark Twain reluctantly chose a world lecturing tour which brought him to Australia in 1895 to avoid bankruptcy and to repay his debts.¹⁷ For Max O'Rell, R.S. Smythe had arranged a very tight schedule: in Sydney and Melbourne the lecturer performed almost every evening and on some days gave an extra *matinée* for school classes and suburban audiences. Each of his standard lectures would be repeated up to three times in each city. With O'Rell commanding an average of £34 per lecture, the tour could only be described as a money-making machine.¹⁸

Finally, there was a significant social dimension to lecturing activities. Platform entertainments were usually framed by public activities. Tour managers prepared the terrain for the show by booking appropriate venues and posting articles in the local newspapers praising the lecturer’s success in previously visited towns. They made sure that news of a celebrity visiting a town would reach the whole community. O’Rell’s manager R.S. Smythe had travelled to each Australasian town some weeks prior to the arrival of the lecturer and prepared the tour with an ample publicity campaign. An announcement in *The Sydney Morning Herald* stated that O’Rell was found ‘unanimously funnier than Mark Twain—wittier than Thackeray—brighter than Dickens’.¹⁹ The lecturer would be greeted by a welcome committee on arrival and often an influential family would propose a soirée in honour of the famous guest. O’Rell shook the hands of countless mayors and local dignitaries.²⁰ A reception at the local press club or another institution was often organised after the entertainment. When O’Rell arrived in Sydney on 26 April 1892 with his wife and daughter, he was greeted by a group of prominent citizens.²¹ The day after his arrival, the French lecturer and his wife were invited for lunch by the Governor of New South Wales, Lord Jersey.

On the night of his first lecture on 29 April, Max O’Rell set the tone for the rest of his tour. His aim was to provide humorous entertainment without antagonising any of his spectators. The large audience in the Centennial Hall²² appreciated his efforts. A review²³ of his first Australian lecture, on *John Bull at Home*, commented accordingly: ‘The lecture, as might be expected, was just a good-humoured causerie and nothing more—unpretentious, entertaining, and laughter-provoking from first to last.’ He was called the ‘master of the fine art of gliding gracefully and easily over thin ice and finding solid foothold on the other side’.²⁴ O’Rell lectured in Sydney for two weeks. He was more than satisfied with the ticket sales and had an opportunity to see local attractions such as the National Gallery²⁵ which he would later describe as a ‘big brick hut disfiguring the park’.²⁶ Prominent citizens invited him on boat trips and drives around the harbour. Like most foreign visitors, he was charmed by the spectacular landscape. The city of Sydney itself struck him as a giant monument erected to celebrate the English spirit of enterprise.²⁷ He was interviewed by the *Courrier australien*, the newly founded French-language weekly, to which he contributed biographical anecdotes.²⁸

The French lecturer left Sydney by train to arrive in Melbourne on the 14 May 1892. The train ride was memorable only for the monotony of the landscape and the ridiculous change of trains in Albury because of the different rail gauges in the two colonies.²⁹ O'Rell noted the American character of the city with its trams, high buildings and wide, straight streets.³⁰

As in Sydney, Max O'Rell's visit was handled as an official event. On 22 May, he dined with the Victorian Governor Lord Hopetoun, who then attended one of his lectures. O'Rell was also given a reception by the Alliance Française on 26 May at the Masonic Hall.³¹ He expressed his gratitude to the French Consul General in Victoria, Léon Dejardin, for making his stay in Australia so agreeable. Audiences flocked to his lectures at the Atheneum in Collins Street throughout the two weeks of his initial stay in Melbourne. He was by far the greatest entertainment attraction in town, outselling all theatre productions and the famous opera singer Signor Foli.³²

The *Argus* journalist who reviewed O'Rell's first lecture in Melbourne on the 16 May understood that most people went to see the Frenchman for his celebrity status: 'The humour of his lecture consists more perhaps in his manner than his matter, for the substance of it has been mostly drawn from his books [...] and is therefore familiar to a large proportion of his hearers'.³³ However, Max O'Rell's outstanding capacity to entertain should not be underestimated. His lecturing style was unique. With his dramatic presence, O'Rell kept his audiences fascinated for the duration of the lecture: 'to hold an audience rapt and attentive for nearly a couple of hours implies a power of attraction of no common order, and Max O'Rell is a great artist'.³⁴

The 'power of attraction' the French lecturer held over his audience was his ease in public speaking, acquired in more than ten years of experience as a high school teacher, as well as his considerable dramatic talent.³⁵ The Melbourne *Argus* noted: 'Nothing can be more subtle or more sensitive than his expression, nothing more gracefully appropriate than his gesture. [...] It is a frequent effect with him to stop talking altogether when the point of the story is being approached, and by the merest arching of the eyebrows, the slightest possible shrug of the shoulders, the most imperceptible movement of the arm to insinuate the climax with absolutely astonishing effect'.³⁶ Another of his peculiarities was adding piquancy to a remark by a surprised interrogative look or pausing near the end of a sentence as if foreshadowing a post-script. The

essence of his performance was therefore to present established stereotypes of nationality and gender in a light-hearted way.

He had created the public persona of Max O'Rell, the witty Latin connoisseur, who, although a true cosmopolitan, sees the world through French spectacles. By calling his lectures 'causeries', an informal chat of an intellectual nature, he alluded to the French salon tradition, which he interpreted as based on linguistic elegance and charm of delivery. He kept just enough of a French accent 'to give spice to his drolleries',³⁷ but spoke faultless English. Even through his dress and hairstyle, he played on the stereotype of the artistic bon-vivant personified at this period by Alexandre Dumas the younger.³⁸ O'Rell knew that his audience expected him to live up to the stereotyped image they had of Parisian artistic life—slightly bohemian, slightly impious, slightly suggestive of sexual intrigue.

On the other hand, O'Rell developed a keen sense for just how French the audience wanted him to be. A Melbourne reviewer lauded the absence of negatively connoted French attributes: 'Max O'Rell is the antithesis of the conventional Frenchman—uneffusive, undemonstrative and concise *à merveille*, never wasting a word and never omitting one.'³⁹ Through the public image of his marriage to Mary Bartlett, he also presented his commitment to Victorian moral values as irreproachable.

However, his patriotism prevented him from treating the French in the same humorous manner as John Bull, Pat, Jonathan and Sandy. The lecture on Jacques Bonhomme was less amusing, as O'Rell spent one and a half hours refuting the stereotype of French licentiousness and trying to convince his audience that the French were not only virtuous, but also the happiest nation on earth. *The Age* commented: 'Contrasted with former efforts the lecturer did not prove so entertaining, the subject being treated *au sérieux*, and the criticisms of national traits toned down and less droll.'⁴⁰ *The Argus* similarly observed that O'Rell's Frenchness came before his humour, but that the audiences still enjoyed the lecture:

The plaudits which greeted the patriotic outburst may be taken either as proof of the magnanimity of a British audience, or as a recognition of the very kindly and very charming way in which the lecturer had performed his task.⁴¹

Only the paper of the French expatriates, the *Courrier australien*, did not question the concept of France as the happiest nation on earth.⁴²

O'Rell was indeed on a self-appointed mission to rehabilitate French sexual morals in the eyes of the Anglo-Saxons. He explained to his Australasian audiences how untrue the allegation was that most Frenchmen and French women regard marriage as a financial transaction and therefore seek sexual fulfilment elsewhere. He claimed that French marriages were happier than English because a man had to win the affection of his wife after the marriage, whereas English couples experience all their romance before the wedding. Secondly, he argued that the image of French sexuality was distorted by French novels which treated exceptions rather than everyday reality and were therefore not faithful to life. Thirdly he declared that Frenchmen were 'braggarts of vice', whereas Anglo-Saxons were 'hypocrites of virtue'. According to him, it was part of French culture to insinuate marital infidelity, and talk about sexual intrigue even when there was none.

After delivering 25 lectures in Melbourne and Sydney each, Max O'Rell left for Ballarat on the 30 May, where he gave four lectures. The next town was Bendigo, followed by Castlemaine. R.S. Smythe had organised a comprehensive travel schedule: O'Rell not only lectured in many country towns of Victoria and New South Wales, such as Geelong, Euroa and Broken Hill, he went as far as South Australia and Queensland.

The press coverage of O'Rell's lecturing visit to Brisbane is particularly revealing of the intensity and varying expressions of cross-cultural exchange between major Western societies at the end of the nineteenth century. The French lecturer's presence in the Queensland capital was celebrated as a major cultural event. As everywhere in Australia, every lecture was given to full houses. One review noted that O'Rell attracted larger audiences than the explorer Henry M. Stanley⁴³ who had toured Australia the previous year.⁴⁴ The Governor attended the first lecture on 15 August 1892, along with other dignitaries of the colony. O'Rell was a guest of honour at the Brisbane Art Society exhibition, and he watched a boomerang throwing performance on the outskirts of the town.⁴⁵ The poet George Essex Evans⁴⁶ even wrote a poem for the local newspaper to commemorate the visit of the eminent Frenchman.⁴⁷

As in Melbourne, his causerie on the French as 'the happiest nation on earth' did not encounter the same success as his other lectures. A Brisbane reviewer found it 'on the whole quite disappointing' as it did not live up to

the promise of his other critical-but-humorous appraisals of national character. The journalist wondered if O'Rell's glowing image of French society was not a biased and inaccurate one.⁴⁸ Undeterred, the French lecturer also used an interview to promote a positive image of his homeland. Referring to the then current debate on agricultural land ownership in Australia, he held up the French small landholder as the ideal. Jacques Bonhomme was drawn as a hard-working peasant with three acres and a cow, who leads a simple but independent and healthy life. O'Rell, however, professed to be completely ignorant of social, political and economic developments in Australia and insisted that he was very unlikely to write a book about Australia since he had not yet discerned the character of the Australian people.⁴⁹ His remarks resulted in an editorial of the *Brisbane Courier* a few days later.

No one could listen to Max O'Rell's lecture on France without feeling that something for the guidance of Australians in nation forming was to be had in the condition of the French peasantry; and the interview since accorded to a representative of this paper has deepened that impression. There is nothing we so much wish for our colony as to have our people settled on the soil in the capacity at once of owners and of cultivators.⁵⁰

The journalist then wondered why, with the abundance of land, and a sizeable population growth, this was not possible in Queensland. He concluded that Australian settlers lacked the thrift and sobriety of the French peasant described by O'Rell, and that only a shift in mentality would turn around the present worrying situation. It is interesting to note here that the visiting celebrity status of Max O'Rell alone sufficed to give credit to his remarks. His superficial appraisal of the state of French agriculture and the living conditions of French peasants, with a patriotically blind eye to any problems faced by these, was seriously discussed as a possible direction of development in Australia.

Another of O'Rell's remarks which provoked controversy in Brisbane was his description of the English wife. He believed that, in contrast to the French and American wife, Mrs John Bull was not quite the queen of society. The French lecturer admired the educational opportunities for girls in the United States and was deeply impressed with some young American women exercising professions which were formerly a male domain, such as journalism. He portrayed the English wife as a devoted homemaker, able

to transform every house into a haven of comfort and cosiness. But he also pitied her, judging that marriage reduced her role to that of a housekeeper. He observed that after her relatively free girlhood, the British matron was neglected as a woman, virtuous to the point of being 'too much respected'.⁵¹ O'Rell then juxtaposed the American woman, whom he lauded as the queen of society, endowed with beauty, intelligence, a great feeling of self-worth, and a husband who caters to her immense material needs, to the modest English wife. A letter to the editor of the *Brisbane Courier* objected to this depiction. The anonymous reader argued that the subservient position of the English wife was a credit to her modesty. The writer, an 'Englishman', claimed that, feeling guilty about not spending any time with his wife, the American husband heaps luxury items on her, transforming her into an overdressed doll. It is remarkable that in instances of cross-national debate like this one, the actual stereotypes were not challenged. The docile English wife remained docile; the American luxury goddess remained just that. The anonymous writer contented himself with giving a different interpretation of the type, to laud the attributes associated with the stereotype of the English wife and to denigrate the features of the stereotype of the American wife. Another letter to the editor by an 'Englishwoman' thanked the 'Englishman' for defending British womanhood and appreciating the British home.⁵²

After touring several provincial towns of Queensland, the French lecturer worked his way down the eastern coast of Australia and was back in Sydney for another, shorter series of lectures at the beginning of October 1892. An advertisement in the *Sydney Morning Herald* called the visit the 'return of the French Mark Twain to the scene of his earlier triumphs'.⁵³ Even the Governor of New South Wales came to listen to Max O'Rell for a second time. The newspapers reported the death of the famous French writer Ernest Renan while Max O'Rell was in Sydney. He subsequently adapted his lectures to include a eulogy of his compatriot. He talked of Renan as his personal friend and celebrated his achievements. The tribute to his 'colleague', widely advertised in the newspapers, provided O'Rell with new headlines. The eulogy and entrance fees lowered from four to three shillings assured him a wide audience for the second time.

On his way to Melbourne, O'Rell stopped at several Victorian and New South Wales country towns, such as Albury where he was guest of Australian writer Rolf Boldrewood. He was back in the Victorian capital on 28 October

for the Cup the following Tuesday and, as in Sydney, performed another series of six lectures, each with a bonus eulogy of Renan. O'Rell wrote a long article for *The Argus* in which he compared the races at Longchamps, Epsom and Flemington. Of course he gave the first prize to the French derby, for its elegance and vivacity. But he was also deeply impressed by the Melbourne Cup, mostly because of its marvellous organisation and amenities.⁵⁴

In December, O'Rell toured Tasmania. He crossed from Hobart to Bluff in New Zealand on New Year's Eve of 1893. There he stayed for seven weeks, lecturing in Dunedin, Wellington, Christchurch, Hawera, Wanganui and Auckland. He returned to Sydney at the beginning of March, and planned to lecture in several Western Australian cities before sailing for South Africa on the 10 March 1893.

Despite his great success, Max O'Rell does not seem to have warmed to Australasia and its people. His travelogue *John Bull & Co.* contains many harsh criticisms of Australians. Apart from some Sydneysiders and Melburnians, whose intellectual but unpedantic society he appreciated,⁵⁵ he believed the British colonials to be provincial, narrow-minded and pretentious. In the regional towns he visited he observed religious hypocrisy coupled with a high incidence of alcoholism. Brisbane, according to him, had nothing interesting to offer apart from its tropical vegetation; Ballarat appeared to him like a faded woman, and Geelong was an insignificant town in which the most small-minded bigotry prevailed. Colonial society in general was utterly unoriginal and contented itself with copying all the follies of the old British world, such as snobbery and prudishness. Australian middle-class women were the prime target of his scorn. Without any purpose in life, they combined vulgarity and snobbishness to lead empty and self-satisfied existences.⁵⁶ In an interview with an English newspaper after his return he declared: 'The Australian women are the most frivolous I have ever met. They can think of nothing but lawn tennis, tea parties, garden parties, and calls. They are very particular about "the set" with which they mix.'⁵⁷ The general Anglo-Saxon lack of cheerfulness in women was here intensified by the monotonous lives of the colonies.⁵⁸

The lecturer linked the dullness of country life to the monotony of the landscape: 'What a savage, sad land. No vibrant colours. Everything is dreary and glum; everything weeps and seems to die of boredom. The green of the ground, like that of the trees, is greyish or blue, without any intensity and of a desolate monotony.'⁵⁹ For O'Rell, the sad-looking landscape in no way was

compensated for by the exuberance of its people. 'Boredom is spelt all over their faces,' he remarked.⁶⁰

He saw another marked difference to the United States in the parochialism prevailing in Australia. Apart from a ridiculous jealousy between the neighbouring colonies, there was no interest in European or world affairs.⁶¹ He also disliked the atmosphere of speculation dominating the Australian economy.⁶²

The relatively good conditions of the Australasian working class seemed to have been another source of discontent for O'Rell. He called the worker the real sovereign of Australia who did not use the boundless resources which nature had endowed the immense continent with, but made sure that others could never profit from them. The workers at the antipodes were, according to him, lazy drunkards who thought only of their pleasure and were not interested in the development of their country. They took no pride in their workmanship, were badly trained, but were still paid high wages which they spent on frivolities.⁶³ What most angered the French lecturer was the lack of deference of the Australian lower classes for position, seniority and talent.⁶⁴

He contrasted the workers of British descent with German, Swedish or Chinese immigrants who, he believed, had a much higher work ethic.⁶⁵ He sympathised with the lot of Chinese labourers whose market gardens he admired, but had only contempt for the Aboriginal population which he described as follows: 'The Australian native has never really caused any difficulties to the English. Humankind has no more abject and degraded type. Lacking in intelligence and courage, the race has disappeared without difficulty.'⁶⁶ The New Zealand Maoris fared slightly better in the lecturer's opinion when he commented on their warrior spirit and savage sensuality.⁶⁷

However, there were some features of Australian life Max O'Rell enjoyed. He praised Australian newspapers, such as *The Age* and *The Argus* for their elegance of style and their well-researched content.⁶⁸ He placed these publications halfway between the literary elegance but lack of comprehensive information of the major Parisian newspapers and the loud but informative English or American dailies. He thought the inhabitants of the two big Australian cities, Melbourne and Sydney, had keener intellectual interests than Londoners.⁶⁹ He lauded the generous hospitality of Australians and appreciated their relaxed temperament as well as their appreciation of political liberty.

The question remains why O'Rell, despite the great professional and financial success of the lecture tour, presented Australasia in such an acrimonious manner. The letters he wrote to his London publisher towards the end the journey indicate that he was getting very tired of lecturing; and the hectic schedule leaves no doubt that he must have become physically and mentally exhausted. He was more severe with Australia than he was with any other place he wrote about.⁷⁰ This could stem from the fact that O'Rell did not have to worry about Australia as a sales market. He knew that he would not be returning to the antipodes, and therefore would not have to be concerned about antagonising his former audience. Equally, even though many Australians knew and owned his books, the Australasian population was not big enough to really matter for the sale figures of his book.

It is surprising to note that the reaction of the Australasian press was quite subdued, given the hostile and bitter tone dominating O'Rell's travel account. When *John Bull & Co.* appeared in book form and as an article in *La Revue de Paris*⁷¹ in mid-1894, a New Zealand reviewer called it generally even-handed. He objected only to O'Rell's accusation of rampant alcoholism in Australasia and defended the 'colonial workman' against the Frenchman's attacks.⁷² The popularity of Max O'Rell continued to such an extent that when Mark Twain lectured in Australia in 1895, the Australian press criticised the American for publicly denigrating his French colleague earlier that year.⁷³ However, O'Rell's and Twain's American manager, Major Pond, hinted in his memoirs that the Frenchman's popularity had taken a serious blow from his acrimonious remarks: 'He made a trip through Australia and wrote another book which the Australians didn't like. Had he possessed Mark Twain's sagacity, sincerity, and love of his fellow-men, and had he seen things from their favourable point of view instead of from their objectionable side, he might certainly get as much fun out of it and his popularity would have continued.'⁷⁴

Major Pond's prophecy about Max O'Rell's decreasing popularity proved correct. After his death in 1903, the French lecturer faded into oblivion. But it was neither Max O'Rell's derisive remarks about Australians nor his zealous patriotism which rendered his fame ephemeral. It was the lack of depth and originality in his admittedly clever and amusing writings which explains his insignificance in literary history. My argument is, however, that it is precisely these attributes which make him significant for the study of mainstream culture in the late nineteenth century. As a lecturer offering his audience widely

accepted generalities and conventional categorisations he acted as a focal lens of the cross-cultural exchange. It was through his mediation that a benevolent image of the other society, even in a caricatured and stereotypical form, was transmitted and accepted by a wide middle-class audience.

Max O'Rell, although completely forgotten today, was a major phenomenon of middle-class mass entertainment in his time. A close historical study of his lecture tour to the antipodes helps us comprehend the important role of lecturing as a vehicle of cross-cultural debate at the end of the nineteenth century. By demonstrating specific features such as the immediacy and reciprocity of the exchanges through their press coverage and the lecturer's account of them, it becomes clear that these exchanges were very intense. The newspaper articles also show that these exchanges concentrated on certain aspects of the society under scrutiny, particularly on what was termed at this time as morals and manners.

The success of lecturers such as O'Rell provides a window onto the mainstream beliefs of late nineteenth-century society. Far from placing himself at the head of the forces of change, a popular lecturer like O'Rell tailored his message to suit the expectations and beliefs of his audience. These beliefs, in turn, were often quite conservative. O'Rell's hostility to feminism and the New Woman, for example, won widespread approval and acclaim from his female listeners. He was even criticised by two members of the Brisbane audience for his admiration of the educational and professional opportunities open to American women.

Most historians have tended to focus on the more radical strains of colonial society in this period, the manner in which Australasia was regarded as a laboratory for new social developments. The acclaim for a lecturer like O'Rell, however, suggests that more conservative and traditional views were also deeply anchored in the society of the time. This seems particularly true of gender where, despite the advent of female suffrage in New Zealand and South Australia, an attachment to conventional views of the role and place of women provided fertile ground for O'Rell.

The popularity of O'Rell and other lecturers also reveals the interconnectedness of this age. Despite the immense geographical distances, middle-class Australian audiences were well-informed and closely connected to the cultural trends of not only England, but also France and the United States. They were therefore able to engage in a very specific kind of cross-cultural

exchange which lecturing, this uniquely middle-class form of mass-culture, provided. Many of the most popular lecturers of the day are now, like O’Reil, largely forgotten. But their success is a vivid reminder that the Australasian colonies were part of a broad network of cultural exchange and interaction which marked the nineteenth-century world.

The University of Melbourne



M. PAUL BLOUET (MAX O'RELL)

Photo of Max O'Rell taken during his visit to Melbourne (1892)

By courtesy of the State Library of Victoria

Appendix

A poem published in the *Brisbane Courier*, 16 August 1892, p. 5.

Max, thou art not a stranger, thou,
Australia thy books enow,
Excess of mirth in teardrops ran

O'er Sandy, Bull, and Jonathan.
Right welcome! If ourselves we see
Ever long as we appear to thee,
Like Jonathan we shall when hit
Laugh—for no malice taints by wit.

George Essex Evans

15th August 1892

Notes

- 1 Held at the Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington.
- 2 Max O'Rell, *John Bull & Co. The Great Colonial Branches of the Firm: Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa*, London, Warne & Co., 1894.
- 3 This article has arisen from the author's PhD project analysing Max O'Rell's role in the cross-cultural debate over manners and morals in late nineteenth century France, Britain and the United States.
- 4 Max O'Rell undertook six lecture tours of the United States between 1887 and 1902.
- 5 On R. S. Smythe, see M. Shillingsburg, 'Smythe, Robert Sparrow (1833–1917)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 12, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1990, pp. 4–5, and also <http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A120005b.htm?hilite=smythe>.
- 6 Miriam Jones Shillingsburg, *At Home Abroad: Mark Twain in Australasia*. Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1988, p. 61.
- 7 Mireille Rosello, *Declining the Stereotype: Ethnicity and Representation in French Cultures*, Hanover, N.H., London, University Press of New England, 1998, p. 11.

- 8 Max O'Rell, *La Maison John Bull et Cie: Les Grandes Succursales. Le Canada, l'Australie, la Nouvelle-Zélande, l'Afrique du Sud*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1894, p. 5.
- 9 Mark Twain, 'What Paul Bourget Thinks of Us', *The North American Review*, January 1895, Vol. 160, n° 458, p. 56.
- 10 Max O'Rell, 'Mark Twain and Paul Bourget', *The North American Review*, March 1895, Vol. 160, n° 460, p. 303.
- 11 Max O'Rell, 'The Typical American', *The North American Review*, May 1890, Vol. 151, n° 402, p. 589.
- 12 See O'Rell's letter to the Editor, *The Times*, London, 14 October 1898, p. 8, and 7 November 1898, p. 7.
- 13 *Otago Witness*, 23 June 1892, p. 43.
- 14 Sheila Rowbotham calls this kind of strategy the 'fantasy of power'. Creating an illusion of female royal suzerainty means 'convincing the oppressed that they enjoy their actual powerlessness'. Sheila Rowbotham, *Women, Resistance and Revolution*, New York, A. Lane, 1972, p. 39.
- 15 *Taranaki Herald*, 26 January 1893, p. 2.
- 16 Another example of the particular kind of dialogue evolving from the interaction of lecturer and public is a letter received by the Melbourne newspaper *The Argus*. After having attended O'Rell's lecture, the Melburnian challenged the lecturer's assertion that the French as a nation and as individuals are eminently non-aggressive, citing their willingness to fight duels as a proof of the contrary. *The Argus*, 26 May 1892, p. 6.
- 17 Robert Cooper wrote: 'But a lecture tour was the quickest way of raising money.' Robert Cooper, *Around the World with Mark Twain*, New York, Arcade Publishing, 2000, p. 1.
- 18 O'Rell had by March 1898 given more than 1,300 lectures, which brought his annual income from lecturing to about £3,400. *Advocate of Peace*, Boston, March 1898, p. 58.
- 19 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 April 1892, p. 2.
- 20 O'Rell even met the American president Grover Cleveland during his first visit to the United States in 1888.
- 21 The *Sydney Morning Herald* reports that those present at the wharf included a Dr Bartlett, brother of the lecturer's wife Mary who had emigrated from England and established himself in the New South Wales town of Cowra. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 April 1892, p. 7.
- 22 I have not been able to access attendance figures for his lectures in Australia. From the newspaper comments and his letters it becomes clear that most of his Australasian lectures were sold out, but the number of seats in the venue varied according to the size of the town. O'Rell was able to attract huge audiences,

2,500 in Boston in 1890 and 4,500 in Birmingham in 1896. See *Washington Post*, 7 January 1890 and O’Rell’s letter of 21 October 1896. I believe that the Centennial Hall in Sydney and the Athenaeum in Melbourne had capacities of more than 1,000 people.

23 The most valuable press coverage for this article was that by the newspapers of the bigger Australian centres such as Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, in which he spent at least five days. *The Age* and *The Argus* contained remarkably sophisticated reviews of his lectures, even in comparison to American or English articles. The in-depth coverage by the *Brisbane Courier* reflected the intensity of the debate over manners and morals.

24 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 April 1892, p. 4.

25 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 May 1892, p. 7.

26 O’Rell, *La Maison John Bull*, p. 62.

27 O’Rell, *La Maison John Bull*, p. 61.

28 *Courrier australien*, 7 May 1892, p. 1.

29 O’Rell, *La Maison John Bull*, p. 66.

30 O’Rell, *La Maison John Bull*, p. 68.

31 *The Argus*, 27 May 1892, p. 5.

32 *Otago Witness*, 23 June 1892, p. 43.

33 *The Argus*, 17 May 1892, p. 7.

34 *North Otago Times*, 21 January 1893, p. 3.

35 Some years later, in 1897, O’Rell adapted the French comedy *Le Voyage de M. Perrichon* for an English audience, with himself performing the leading role. His acting received favourable reviews. See *Era*, 10 April 1897, p. 13.

36 *The Argus*, 21 May 1892, p. 7.

37 *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 1 October 1897, p. 12.

38 *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 4 March 1888.

39 *The Argus*, 19 May 1892, p. 6.

40 *The Age*, 24 May 1892, p. 5.

41 *The Argus*, 24 May 1892, p. 6.

42 *Courrier australien*, 8 October 1892, p. 4.

43 Stanley seemed to be the benchmark against which O’Rell constantly compared his reception. *Courrier australien*, 7 May 1892, p. 1.

44 *Brisbane Courier*, 16 August 1892, p. 5.

45 *Brisbane Courier*, 18 August 1892, p. 4.

46 On George Essex Evans see M. D. O’Hagan, ‘Evans, George Essex (1863–1909)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 8, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1981, pp. 446–447 and <http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A080471b.htm>.

47 See Appendix.

- 48 *Brisbane Courier*, 18 August 1892, p. 4.
- 49 *Brisbane Courier*, 20 August 1892, p. 4.
- 50 *Brisbane Courier*, 22 August 1892, p. 4.
- 51 *New York Times*, 24 October 1884, p. 5.
- 52 *Brisbane Courier*, 23 August 1892, p. 7.
- 53 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 September 1892, p. 2.
- 54 *The Argus*, 5 November 1892, p. 4.
- 55 O'Rell, *La Maison John Bull*, p. 68.
- 56 O'Rell, *La Maison John Bull*, p. 74–80.
- 57 *Evening Post*, Wellington, 6 January 1894, p. 1.
- 58 O'Rell, *La Maison John Bull*, p. 135.
- 59 O'Rell, *La Maison John Bull*, p. 143.
- 60 O'Rell, *La Maison John Bull*, p. 148.
- 61 O'Rell, *La Maison John Bull*, p. 95–98.
- 62 O'Rell, *La Maison John Bull*, p. 192.
- 63 O'Rell, *La Maison John Bull*, p. 196–197.
- 64 O'Rell, *La Maison John Bull*, p. 99.
- 65 O'Rell, *La Maison John Bull*, p. 210.
- 66 O'Rell, *La Maison John Bull*, p. 173.
- 67 O'Rell, *La Maison John Bull*, p. 270–277.
- 68 O'Rell, *La Maison John Bull*, p. 23.
- 69 *Evening Post*, Wellington, 6 January 1894, p. 1.
- 70 The last leg of his trip, South Africa, left more pleasant impressions with him: '[...] but for true enjoyment give me South Africa. I travelled all over it; I visited Zululand, and saw the spot where the Prince Imperial was killed. Johannesburg interested me most. Here you have a society very peccant. There are Englishmen and Frenchmen, Greeks, Jews, and the natives, who are great, tall, fine fellows. Nothing delighted me so much as to study character in South Africa.' *Evening Post*, Wellington, 6 January 1894.
- 71 Entitled *En Australie*, the article contained the passages concerning Australia and New Zealand.
- 72 *Otago Witness*, 22 November 1894, p. 51.
- 73 Shillingsburg, *At Home Abroad*.
- 74 James Burton Pond, *Eccentricities of Genius: Memories of Famous Men and Women of the Platform*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1901, p. 235.