

TASMA'S REMARKABLE CAREER  
AS A LECTURER IN FRANCE AND BELGIUM  
(1880–1893)

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The public lecture was a nineteenth century phenomenon. It was one of the most popular forms of entertainment and instruction, attended in large numbers, mainly by the middle classes. In Australia talks could be held in anything from vast town halls in cities to small church halls in the country. Speakers ranged from international celebrities like Mark Twain and the explorer Stanley to local amateur enthusiasts. Patricia Clarke, in her biography of Tasma, quotes Clara Aspinall, who visited Melbourne in the early 1860s and wrote that even then there was a host of ‘lectures on every conceivable subject’, especially well attended by women (Clarke 1994, 68)<sup>1</sup>.

The June 2008 number of *Explorations* contains an article by Dr Jana Verhoeven on the Australasian lecture tour by the French writer Max O’Rell (Léon Paul Blouet) in 1892 and early 1893. He was so popular that his manager called the tour ‘the biggest thing in years’ (Verhoeven, 3). It is not generally known that he had an Australian counterpart, a woman who began an eminent career lecturing in France and Belgium well before O’Rell came to the Antipodes. She was Jessie Couvreur, who wrote under the pen name of Tasma. She was a journalist before and during her lecture years, and later became a highly regarded novelist in Australia and abroad. More unusually, after her husband died in 1894, she persuaded the London *Times* to let her take his place as their representative in Brussels. Tasma was a remarkable woman, all the more so because women lecturers were a rarity, if not a curiosity. Jack Fullerton in Tasma’s novel *A Knight of the White Feather* (1892, 12), even found it shocking that Linda Robley, the French-educated woman he admired, should give a public talk on positivism in the local schoolhouse. As if the subject were not bad enough, he marvelled at her ‘having the face to do it’. Those who did speak in public, usually in America or England, were

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<sup>1</sup> As is the case with anyone writing on Tasma, this article is greatly indebted to Patricia Clarke’s biography, her publication of Tasma’s diaries and the research material that she has made available in the National Library of Australia, Canberra.

nearly always championing a serious cause such as the abolition of slavery or women's rights, like Catherine Helen Spence who toured in 1893.

Tasma, mainly in Europe, and O'Rell<sup>2</sup> in Australasia make a very interesting pair of foreign high-profile performers to compare, not only from the point of view of gender, personality, nationality and subject matter, but also of language, style, audience and influence. To begin with, despite differences in the extent of their celebrity and the quality of their work, their career paths were remarkably similar. Jessie taught her siblings, Blouet taught in a prestigious London school; both progressed from journalism to writing and lecturing.

When O'Rell began his lecture tours in America he was already well known to his audiences through his popular books, part travelogue and part amusing depictions of the manners, morals and foibles of various national types: Sandy the typical Scot, Pat the Irishman, Jonathan the American and his countryman Jacques Bonhomme. On stage he brought these stereotypes to life with humour, wit and charm. Basing his lecturing technique on Mark Twain, O'Rell had a natural dramatic gift of delivery and gesture, and his English no doubt benefitted greatly from him having an English wife and living in England for twenty years. He was above all an entertainer—he called himself a humorous lecturer—who spoke to packed houses wherever he went. The women in the audience adored Max O'Rell.

Women speakers, however, were certainly a strange sight when Tasma gave her first lecture on 20 July 1880—seven years earlier than Max O'Rell—addressing the Société de géographie commerciale de Paris, and in French. The fact that she spoke in French is not as surprising as it may seem. 'Tasma' was born Jessie Catherine Huybers in London in 1848 to a Flemish

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<sup>2</sup>Paul Blouet was born in Avranches in 1847. After completing an Arts degree from the Sorbonne, he embarked on several careers before finding fame as a writer. The military was his first, ill-timed, choice as he was soon injured in the Franco-Prussian War. Next came journalism, but having no experience or influence, he failed both in Paris and London. He was therefore glad to take up a teaching post in 1874 at St Paul's College London, where he met his English wife. His first book was written under the name Max O'Rell while he was working and living in England. *John Bull et son Île* (1883) (*John Bull and His Island*) quickly became a best seller in Paris, then also in England and America when it was translated. A string of similar popular books soon followed.

wine merchant father and a half-French mother, Charlotte, well-educated in European culture. Jessie was the second of the three children they already had when they immigrated to Tasmania in 1852. Several more were born in Hobart, a town Charlotte disdained, insisting on home-schooling the children herself with a library of books that came over with them. Jessie was encouraged to speak French and discuss literature, art and philosophy. It was obvious from the start that she had a quick, unconventional, enquiring mind which she maintained all her life.

Thanks to her novels, her diaries and those of a sister and brother, we know a lot more about Tasma's life than we do of O'Rell's. Despite her intellectual leanings and her mother's opposition, Jessie fell for the charms of handsome Charles Fraser and married him in 1867 aged nineteen. It was a case of marry in haste and repent at leisure. However, those early years as the wife of a farm manager with whom she had almost nothing in common, on various properties of his wealthy brother-in-law William Degraives, would later provide material for her novels and lectures. Although she was finally able to separate from Fraser when he was declared bankrupt in 1878, it was not until 1883 that she managed to divorce him, a rare and difficult thing for a woman to achieve at that time.

A few months after Jessie returned to her beloved family, she sailed with most of them from Hobart to London and Europe. Her main occupation on this journey provides evidence of another talent that would later make her such a good lecturer. Her diary of this trip on the sailing ship *Windward* and family letters show that she was the teacher of the four older children. She had already taken on some of this role at home with the younger ones when she was only thirteen; her quite wild imagination inspired intriguing stories and play-acting. A long and well-informed article on Tasma in the English publication *The Queen, The Lady's Newspaper* (13.1.1894) refers to 'the old pleasure to amuse and inform others that had been one of the strongest delights of her girlhood'. We have no evidence that Jessie ever gave a lecture in Australia, but in England and Europe she was an avid but not uncritical attender. In London she went to hear some speeches on 'The Female Education Question', recording in her diary: 'Considering he [the Marquis of Lorne] was reading it all the time and tried to look as if he were not reading it, there was nothing very impressive about it.' (*Windward* diary, 30.6.1873). When later she was the lecturer on the platform, she would speak without notes for an hour or more.

From London they went to Brussels and then Paris, which Jessie would visit many times. She always revelled in its vibrant literary, artistic, philosophical and political life, always eager to broaden her knowledge of European culture. This was to stand her in good stead when the family returned to Australia after three years abroad. Back with her mother and several of her siblings living in Melbourne, Jessie was faced with the problem of finding a way of supporting herself; in fact she was never to be entirely free of money worries even after her second marriage. Like O'Rell she turned to writing and journalism. Thanks to influential people she had met in literary circles, her own and her family connections, her career took off in 1877 and she never looked back. She began with short stories in annuals and collections at the same time as newspaper articles for the *Australasian*. For the articles she wrote as The Contributor, The Tourist, The Traveller and later The Wanderer, but for her fiction Jessie chose the nom de plume of Tasma in honour of her childhood home, almost a decade before Nellie Mitchell became Melba. Her writing was very well received and in a surprisingly short time Tasma became a well-known name.<sup>3</sup>

Tasma based her short stories on her own experiences of city, country and European life, but though these are still worth reading, the newspaper articles are more relevant to her future years as a public speaker.<sup>4</sup> Even while she was in demand as a lecturer, she still sent articles back to the *Australasian*. They range from imaginative pieces, travel reports and literary criticism to subjects that never ceased to exercise her mind: social problems, especially those concerning women and families, and putting the case for radical proposals, often with ethical implications that were sure to be contentious, such as cremation. Jessie was never afraid of being controversial. Once launched she continued writing newspaper and review articles until 1889,

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<sup>3</sup> 'Tasma Terrace', the home of the National Trust in Melbourne, was originally seven handsome, three-storey terraces built in the late 1870s and mid-1880s. It is not known where the name originated, but as there was no other Tasma at that time, it is quite possible that the buildings were named after Tasma the writer and lecturer.

<sup>4</sup> The last of her short stories was published in 1892, but quite a few of them, particularly 'Monsieur Caloche', were reprinted throughout the twentieth century in collections of Australian short stories and Australian women's fiction. 'Monsieur Caloche' last appeared as late as 1991 in *The Penguin Best Australian Short Stories*.

usually several a year, and her short stories followed roughly the same pattern until 1892.

There was much more to write about after Jessie made her second trip to Europe in 1879, once again to join her family. As she had already made a name for herself in Australia, she had the confidence to see if her writing could have the same success in the wider world. Little did Jessie know that, apart from eight months spent in Melbourne in 1883–1884 to obtain her final divorce from Charles Fraser, she would never again come back to live in Australia, yet Australia would become the almost exclusive focus of her lecturing career, which began quite soon after her arrival in Paris where the Latin Quarter became her spiritual home. The articles she sent back to the *Australasian* increased in number and range to include not only theatre and art but also commerce and industry, as well as reports of lectures she attended. No doubt there was also a financial imperative behind this increased output, but, to her surprise, a lucrative source of income was about to present itself: Jessie received an invitation to give a lecture to the Société de géographie commerciale de Paris.

It seems that an article Jessie had published on the attractions of emigration to the fruit-growing areas of Tasmania had come to the attention of the geographical fraternity.<sup>5</sup> As this was a period of great enthusiasm for colonial expansion and descriptions of remote areas of the globe, the normally conservative, male-dominated Society must have found the subject so interesting that they would make the unusual decision to ask a woman to address them. Jessie naturally accepted, and on 20 July 1880 she spoke in public for the first time on the more inclusive subject of 'L'Australie et les avantages qu'elle offre à l'émigration française'. A report of the Society's proceedings (21.12.1880) shows that the lecture by Tasma was a triumph. She had spoken for an hour and a half—all too short in the President's view—in French and without referring to notes. The President, M. Meurand, began his report by noting that: 'Through her very well-planned lecture, the way she spoke, which was fluent, vivid, often lively, the young Anglo-Australian from Melbourne has a great rapport with her audience from the start; she

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<sup>5</sup> *Queen* (13.1.1894, 57). The writer of the long piece on Tasma claims that the article appeared in *La Nouvelle Revue*, although so far it has not been found.

was interrupted many times by warm applause...’<sup>6</sup> Audiences for talks to serious societies on serious subjects were not used to being addressed by someone who was entertaining as well as informative, and they warmed to her immediately.

It is hard to underestimate the personal effect Jessie had on her audience. Apart from the novelty factor of hearing a woman, and an Australian, address a prestigious Parisian society, they were charmed by this very good-looking, slender, graceful young woman in her early thirties, who quickly won over her audience with her sincerity, enthusiasm and wit. M. Meurand called her a ‘*charmeuse*’ (charmer) as did every reporter of her talks in one way or another. Apart from the great appeal and interest of her subject, like O’Rell, her triumph is always in great part a personal one. Just as O’Rell had a special appeal for women, Tasma seems to have had the same effect on men. As we shall see, reports of her performance in lectures became more and more fulsome, both in newspapers and in official minutes of meetings.

Whenever Jessie put her energies into a new creative direction, recognition was swift and a period of great activity followed. The content of this first lecture in Paris and the way she delivered it set the pattern for those that followed. As this was her first talk on Australia, she began with a summary of the development of Australia from discovery to the prosperity of the large cities where almost everything that could be bought and enjoyed in Europe could be found, emphasising how quickly all this had been achieved. On the other hand, the lives of the squatters tending vast flocks of sheep and herds of cattle on their vast properties were far from easy. She ended her talk, as she often did, by taking up the theme of the article that had gained her this invitation to speak in public, namely emigration. In this case she spoke not about emigrants to the orchard districts of Tasmania, but of artists who would enhance the cultural life of Australia while benefitting from the wealth and opportunities to be had for themselves and their families.

Jessie must have been continually surprised at how little her audience knew about Australia, the misconceptions they held and the stereotypes they believed. It is worth once again quoting the Society’s report of the 21 December 1880 meeting, which is typical, even down to the Gallic exaggeration.

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<sup>6</sup> ‘Par le plan très nettement arrêté de sa conférence, par sa parole facile, colorée, souvent piquante, la jeune Anglo-Australienne de Melbourne inspire dès l’abord une vive sympathie à l’assistance ; elle est maintes fois interrompue par de chaleureux applaudissements...’

The fact is that until now Australia did not appear to us to have anything appealing at all. We imagined almost hideous blacks who have remained in the Stone Age, and who will have disappeared before becoming civilised; convicts, sad representatives of a superior race, who were the first colonists of Australia; gold seekers, hungry and brutal, *durum genus*; finally the innumerable sheep, imported from Europe—doubtless a precious commodity, but hardly poetic. Well! Poetry in person has appeared before us in the person of Tasma and in her words, so carefully chosen and so appropriate to what she is describing.<sup>7</sup>

Contrary to O'Rell, whose whole career was built on creating stereotypes, Tasma wanted to dispel false impressions of Australia and its people. Her aim was to inform and perhaps also to persuade: *L'Indépendance belge* (17.3.1889) reported her as saying: '*J'aime mon pays et aspire à le faire aimer*' (I love my country and aim to make it loved). However, as a former teacher of her siblings, she knew that a well-planned lesson was not enough. A natural delivery was something Jessie worked on from the very beginning. Commenting in her diary (21.3.1890, 68) on a lecture she had just given at the Palais des Académies in Brussels, Jessie wrote, 'As usual I had it off by heart so pat, that I never consulted a note the whole time, and spoke as though upon the spur of the moment'. To natural speech she added spontaneous, graceful gestures, imagined dialogues, colourful language, unusual expressions, and humour, which was not usually a feature of speeches to Francophone professional societies. The newspaper report of a talk she gave in Antwerp

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<sup>7</sup> 'Le fait est que, jusqu'à ce moment, l'Australie nous était apparue sous des dehors qui n'avaient rien de séduisant. Notre pensée évoquait ces nègres presque hideux qui en sont restés à l'âge de pierre, et qui auront disparu avant de s'être civilisés ; ces convicts, tristes représentants d'une race supérieure, qui furent les premiers colons de l'Australie ; ces chercheurs d'or, affamés et brutaux, *durum genus* ; ces moutons enfin, importés d'Europe et dont le nombre ne se compte plus, —très précieux à coup sûr, mais d'une poésie douteuse.— Eh bien ! la poésie en personne nous est apparue sous les traits de Tasma, et dans son langage si choisi à la fois et si approprié aux choses qu'elle raconte.'

described this wit and humour as a particularly British trait.<sup>8</sup> The combined effect of these techniques had Tasma's audience in the palm of her hand almost from the beginning. To end each lecture she presented the nineteenth century equivalent of a slide show—*projections à la lumière oxhydrique*—a magic lantern show using photographs. This would have been quite a novelty as most of the audience's impressions would have been gained from illustrations based on occasional etchings in novels, travellers' tales and papers such as the popular *L'Illustration*.

Reports of the extraordinary success of her lecture to the Société de géographie commerciale de Paris must have spread quickly, because before long she received invitations to speak again on that and other subjects not only in France but also in Belgium. The month after her first lecture, *La Nouvelle Revue* published Tasma's only work of fiction in French, the novella, *L'Amour aux Antipodes*. A month later *L'Indépendance belge* presented it as a serial in eight parts. Its popularity no doubt added lustre to her growing reputation both in France and Belgium. The acclaim she received took several forms. Normally, after being fulsomely thanked for her lecture, she was presented with a large bouquet, but the Geographical Society of Bordeaux, where she was invited to speak at their annual meeting in February 1881, presented her with a silver medal struck in her honour. After Bordeaux came a tour of Belgium. Madame Tasma's reputation grew exponentially as she fulfilled engagements at Gand (Ghent), Marchiennes and Bruges. Her lectures were so highly praised by then that at Antwerp she received one of her greatest honours: an invitation to a private audience with King Leopold at the palace in Brussels on 20 March 1881, which she described fully in her article published in the *Australasian* on 16 July 1881.

As Jessie always spoke with conviction and often ended her lectures with proposals for emigration or mutually beneficial trading partnerships, she could easily have given the impression of being a woman on a mission. According to her report, the King certainly thought so. Jessie soon found that the audience was not intended to be just a general conversation about Australia over light refreshments. The King was indeed interested in Australia, but his main concern was the need for a shipping link between their two countries. He asked her to be 'a medium of propaganda' for the proposal and to say in

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<sup>8</sup> A cutting dated only 17 March, in the Papers of Patricia Clarke, NLA MS 8363 Box 24, No. 9.



her lectures that he personally encouraged her ‘useful and practical mission’. This should not have surprised Jessie, for in a way she was unofficially doing the work of a roving ambassador for her country. However it did, and she felt obliged to assure her Australian readers that she had ‘never had anything more ambitious in view than the familiarising of the colonies to the minds of my hearers, within the limited and quite unofficial range of a woman’s experience’ (*Australasian* 16 July 1881). Events had obviously overtaken such modestly stated intentions. It is unusual for Tasma, a radical New Woman of the day, to express the idea of the limited range of a woman’s experience, but no doubt she felt obliged to make it clear to the public that she was not speaking in any official capacity.

Despite this disclaimer, there is evidence that Tasma’s enthusiastic appeals for artists and teachers to emigrate to Australia did not fall on deaf ears. As pointed out by John Drury in his essay on Berthe Mouchette (Drury 2015), at least three people were so inspired by hearing her lecture on ‘L’Australie et les avantages qu’elle offre à l’émigration française’ to the Société de géographie commerciale de Paris that they left secure positions in France and followed Tasma’s advice. They were Berthe Mouchette, her husband Émile and her sister Marie Lion. Oscar Comettant in his book *In the Land of Kangaroos and Gold Mines (Au pays des kangourous et des mines d’or, 1890)*, translated by Judith Armstrong, 1980, 158-159, describes how the decision was made. Madame Fraser’s speech had been so animated and persuasive that

Monsieur Mouchette said to his wife on coming out of the talk, half joking and half seriously, that they should go off to Australia. ‘Why not?’ answered Madame Mouchette, with her usual enterprise and determination. ‘I’d love to!’ said Mademoiselle Lyon [sic]. From that moment they had but one thought—to set sail for their El Dorado, attracted less perhaps by the thought of making their fortune than by that special attraction that is irresistible to all imaginative spirits, the thought of the unknown, of the perils of travel, of a new countryside.

Berthe Mouchette was an artist who went on to found the first Alliance Française in Australia, and Marie Lion continued her career as an artist and writer. They became prominent members of Melbourne and Adelaide society,

contributing greatly to the artistic and cultural life of both cities, thus fulfilling one of the main aims of Tasma's lectures.

A few years later Jessie would receive an even higher honour than the audience with King Leopold, this time from France, where her lectures were greatly admired and taken as serious contributions to that country's knowledge of Australia and its relationship to France. Jessie was awarded the prestigious title of Officier d'Académie, the equivalent of today's Palmes académiques, awarded by the President of France for outstanding services to education or French culture. Once again it was an honour rarely bestowed on a woman and a foreigner.

Tasma's audience with King Leopold, which was widely reported in Belgian newspapers, also enhanced her reputation as a lecturer. By now she was a celebrity and was several times referred to in the press in 1881 as 'l'éminente conférencière'.<sup>9</sup> More talks followed in Belgium to prestigious gatherings in regional towns, followed by a wide range of societies in Brussels, such as the Soirées populaires, the Cercle artistique et littéraire and the Cercle des anciens normalistes— teachers often made up a significant group in her audiences. After Belgium it was back to Paris and another series of lectures there. The article in *Queen* states that she also spoke in Holland.

An important lecture Jessie gave on Queensland in June 1883, once again to the Société de géographie commerciale de Paris, would have confirmed King Leopold in his opinion of her having a mission.<sup>10</sup> This time she was not describing Australia but concentrating on its development: Queensland with its huge sheep stations run like villages by their wealthy owners; emigrants could own land under a democratic government. She then talked about French-Australian commercial relations, which already existed for wool, urging imports of Australian wine and frozen meat. All this was enlivened with her usual humour, gently mocking European ignorance about Australia. Her audience laughed loudly when she said that she even knew of a London family who were despairing because their son wanted to marry an

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<sup>9</sup> Fryer Library MSS F372 n° 5, headed 'Belgique; n° 6, 'Chronique de la Ville; N° 7, 'La France'; n° 19, no heading.

<sup>10</sup> '*Queensland — la dernière-née des colonies australiennes, son bétail, son coton, son sucre*' ('Queensland: the youngest of the Australian colonies, its livestock, its cotton, its sugar').

Australian girl. 'We expected to see a savage quite prepared to eat her in-laws.'<sup>11</sup>

It is significant that during her lecturing career, which lasted into the 1890s, Jessie wrote few short stories but kept sending articles for publication back to Australia from Paris and London, apart from a gap from 1885 to 1888. That gap of three years was a particularly busy period for Tasma. In 1885 she remarried, this time an older man, the distinguished Belgian liberal parliamentarian, free trader and social reformer Auguste Couvreur. Like Tasma he too was a journalist. Once again Jessie's mother did not approve of her daughter giving up her hard-won independence, and Charlotte Huybers was probably right. Although she made her husband's house 'a centre of the intellectual and political life of Brussels'<sup>12</sup>, after the first few years Jessie wrote in her diary: 'I was not born with a wife's instincts I fancy' (20.3.1889), and she seemed to resent the time that had to be devoted to social duties. Perhaps, as Rosemary Lancaster (1998) suggests, her everyday existence in Brussels was not the rather bohemian life in Europe she had always imagined. Nonetheless, it was the gestation period for Tasma's third career, this time as a novelist. She wrote seven novels in all, the first five— from *Uncle Piper of Piper's Hill* (1889) to *A Knight of the White Feather* (1892)—in only four years. Her last novel, *A Fiery Ordeal*, was published in 1897, the year of her death. When *Uncle Piper* was published, the first and the best of her novels, it was universally acclaimed both at home and abroad.<sup>13</sup> The second, *In Her Earliest Youth* (1890), also met with general approval. *The Times* (2.5.1890) reviewer wrote 'She is surpassed by few British novelists', and soon Jessie would see herself referred to as 'the Australian George Eliot' or Jane Austen, or likened to Dickens and Brett Harte.<sup>14</sup> The praise was extraordinary.

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<sup>11</sup> *Bulletin de la Société de géographie commerciale de Paris*, June 1883. 'On s'attendait à voir apparaître une sauvagesse toute disposée à manger ses beaux-parents. (Hilarité générale)'

<sup>12</sup> Obituary in *The Times*, 25.10.1897.

<sup>13</sup> There were further editions of *Uncle Piper of Piper's Hill* in the twentieth century: Hadgraft and Beilby (1969) and Pandora (1987). Jessie kept a scrapbook of reviews of her novels from English, French and even German sources.

<sup>14</sup> *L'Indépendance belge* (13.1.1889); *Literary World* (7.2.1890); *Lincolnshire Herald* (24.2.1890).

During this period of intense creativity and even greater reputation, if Jessie continued to give any lectures, Clarke did not come across them. There are reports, however, on at least one of several given in 1889 and one each for 1890, 1892 and 1893. When Tasma gave her lecture on ‘Melbourne et le Bush australien’ to the Société royale belge de géographie on 14 February 1889, *Uncle Piper of Piper’s Hill* had already been published and would have been an added draw-card to the vast audience. Jessie’s Brussels diary written between 1889 and 1891 is very revealing about her life and activities at that time. We know for example that despite many years’ experience on the podium and all the reports of how confidently she presented herself, Jessie was still dreadfully nervous before she went on stage. Writing the day after the ‘Melbourne and the Bush lecture’, she confides: ‘The nervousness which reaches its climax as I mount the platform only gives way after the first few moments—but then comes the reward! The sense of expectancy with the audience is so delightful and then the wrapt attention, the early laugh at the mildest of jokes, and when all is over the crowding round of friends, the jubilant congratulations!’

The people who introduced her talks or reported on them seem to have become increasingly fulsome in their praise. The official minutes of the ‘Melbourne and the Bush’ talk to the Royal Belgian Geographical Society begin by reporting that the President introduced Mme Couvreur: ‘already well-known to the public as Tasma, the name with which she signs her writing, worthy of the pen of a Dickens’.<sup>15</sup> A month earlier in her diary Jessie noted that she had intended talking about her experiences in Queensland in 1869, but obviously her ‘short address’ was considerably expanded. The contrast between the lives of the ‘squatters’, drovers and their families on the huge cattle stations in Queensland and the rapid prosperity of the large cities is one of several she made during her talk on bush life. It seems that even then young men of good family liked to go and work on these stations for fun, despite the hard work and attacks by natives.

In this lecture Tasma said more about Indigenous Australians than she had previously. On this subject she is not progressive, expressing a moderate form of the prevailing opinion of the day. She did admit that they were good trackers and fishermen but extremely primitive in the way they lived,

<sup>15</sup> ‘En ouvrant la séance, M. le président Ch. Reulens présente à l’assemblée Mme Couvreur, déjà bien connue du public sous le nom de Tasma, dont elle signe ses écrits dignes de la plume d’un Dickens.’

unresponsive to education and doomed to eventual extinction. She realised, however, that Europeans had misconceptions about Indigenous Australians as well as many other aspects of Australian life. The way Jessie pointed these out to her audience was through humour, sometimes using Aboriginals as examples. In her first lecture in 1880, during an imaginary conversation between herself and a questioner, she said: 'But there are still many people who imagine that Australia is a place where you see cannibals and convicts running loose in the streets.'<sup>16</sup>

*L'Indépendance belge* (17 February) also published a long report of Tasma's 1889 address, full of flowery compliments that led Jessie to write in her diary (18 February) that it was 'so sugarily [sic] amiable that I cannot help feeling it is dictated by the French instincts of the critic'. This report does however reveal some other very interesting details. Firstly, after almost ten years of Tasma's public appearances, a woman lecturer was still considered a strange sight: '*Une conférence par une femme, spectacle curieux*'. The reporter admits that most people knew very little about Australia: Captain Cook, Botany Bay, the gold rush, the wool trade and rabbits sums up what is generally known about Tasma's 'fifth continent'. And what books would the audience have read? Strangely enough, the first one mentioned is English, *Le Colon de Van Diemen (The Colonist of Van Diemen's Land)*, with its bushrangers and kangaroos, which they may have remembered from their childhood.<sup>17</sup> The other, predictably, is *Australie—Voyage autour du monde* (1869) by the young comte de Beauvoir, an enthusiastic, colourful and informative account of his travels, which was a major influence in forming impressions about Australia in France and Europe for many years. The French, of course, because of their long involvement with exploration in the Pacific and their rivalry with the English, would have been more familiar with Australia than the Belgians. There were many first-hand and fictional accounts of colonial Australia, for both adults and children, published in France from the early 1840s onwards,

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<sup>16</sup> Text of the talk to the Société de géographie commerciale de Paris given on 20 July 1880. NLA, Papers of Patricia Clarke, MS 8363 Folder 6, Box 24.

<sup>17</sup> Charles Rowcroft's *Tales of the Colonies or the Adventures of an Emigrant* (1843) was translated and adapted several times. This is an early work loosely based on the author's stay in Tasmania 1821–1826. The French translation, *Le Colon de Van Diémen, ou Aventures d'un émigrant, contes des colonies*, was published in 1847.

and they were widely read.<sup>18</sup> What is not mentioned is Céleste de Chabrillan and her sensational melodramatic novel (1857), later made into a play in 1864, *Les Voleurs d'or* (*The Gold Robbers*), which coloured Francophone readers' image of Australia for at least the 1860s and 70s. Céleste herself toured with the play in France, Belgium and Holland.

Although she may have wanted to talk about other subjects, Tasma's celebrity as a lecturer rested on her talks about Australia and she rarely deviated from that topic.<sup>19</sup> It is interesting to note that when both Tasma and O'Rell departed from their usual programmes, the subject was Woman. O'Rell, the accomplished entertainer, flattered his female audience with another stereotype, 'Her Royal Highness Woman', whereas, in 1890, Tasma examined the topic as a serious issue under the title of 'Les transformations dans l'état social de la femme'. It was a subject close to her heart as she had always been interested in social questions and the status of women. The novels she was writing, especially *The Penance of Portia James* (1891), *A Knight of the White Feather* (1892) and *Not Counting the Cost* (1895) would more and more show active, intelligent heroines chafing at the limitations of married life and the lack of intellectual stimulus or avenues for self-expression for women.

Although there are brief newspaper reports of other lectures by Tasma and probably more that have not come to light, the last major account we have is of an address on the subject of 'La Tasmanie : Voyage par le cap Horn' to the Société royale belge de géographie on 23 March 1892. This was partly a talk on Tasmania and partly a traveller's tale of her voyage to London via New Zealand and Cape Horn in 1873 on board the *Windward*, drawing on details she had written in her diary. Once again she brought Tasmania to life with a mixture of her personal experience and the history of the island. She began with the early convict colony and the fate of the Tasmanian Aborigines, enlivening her presentation with the exploits of bushrangers and escaped convicts, and ended with life as she knew it on the tranquil Apple Isle, followed by the usual magic lantern show. Tasma had thus come full circle as her first invitation to give a lecture twelve years earlier was the result of an

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<sup>18</sup> See Thornton-Smith, 1986 and Thornton-Smith, & Clancy 1991.

<sup>19</sup> Apart from one early lecture on New Zealand, Tasma's talks concentrated on presenting an informative and interesting picture of Australian history, geography, fauna and flora, natives, society, institutions, agriculture, industry and trade.

article she had written on the advantages of emigration to the fruit-growing areas of Tasmania.

The reporter for *L'Indépendance belge* (24.3.1892) may well have been the same as the one who wrote the account of the 1889 lecture since he filled two-thirds of the first column with amusing childhood memories of *Le Colon de Van Diémen*—already mentioned in the earlier article—which he said was read at school with *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Swiss Family Robinson*. This book must therefore have been very widely known and loved, at least in Belgium. The reporter says that they read and reread it; they devoured it and learned it by heart, fascinated by the kangaroos and bushrangers. This led to an amusing cultural misapprehension with the word 'bushranger' which, because they knew no English, they heard as '*bûches rangées*' (stacked logs). The teacher didn't know much more than they did, but the children worked out that bushrangers were men and couldn't possibly refer to anything vegetable and combustible.

The rest of the article is full of praise for Tasma herself, so much so that the author sounds more like a fan than a newspaper reporter. If the 1889 review was 'sugarily amiable', this one is almost treacly, and not in a way that would particularly please a feminist. Tasma is so charming, he writes, that she makes most male lecturers seem ugly. Her syntax is impeccable in French and he loves her charming British accent, which has a certain '*gaucherie*', but even that is '*délicieuse*'. He finds her recollections exquisitely candid, her impressions sincere, poetic and enhanced with humour. Finally, the reporter pays her the ultimate accolade: 'We find ourselves almost converted to the emancipation of women, of votes for women, the election of women.' He would happily vote her into the Parliament.<sup>20</sup>

Once she started lecturing, Jessie was probably not particularly pleased to read reports that she had an English accent in French. Given her Francophone background, education and experience, French was an integral part not only of her living and writing but also of her background and personality. She may well have thought of herself as bi-lingual, but how good was she? Her novels were liberally sprinkled with French words and expressions, with or without 'as the French proverb says', or 'as the French expressively call it', to the annoyance of several critics, a few of whom

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<sup>20</sup> 'Nous voilà presque convertis à l'émancipation féminine, au suffrage féminin, au mandat féminin'.

were unkind enough not only to complain about how unnecessarily frequent these expressions were, but also to point out that they were not always used correctly.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, in France and Belgium comments on the French of her lectures were invariably full of praise: what she said was fluent, correct, simple but elegant, polished, witty. As far as her accent was concerned, Jessie would soon have realised that her English accent in French was a positive asset. Both O'Rell and Tasma owed part of their appeal to the way they spoke the foreign language. In Tasma's case, whether the accent was called slight, pronounced or exotic, it was always seen as charming. An account of her talk to the Cercle artistique et littéraire in Antwerp (16 March, no year) reported that '*Elle parle couramment le français avec un accent prononcé, mais qui n'est qu'un charme de plus*'.<sup>22</sup> To *L'Indépendance belge* (17 February 1889) her British accent was '*d'un charme irrésistible dans son exotisme colonial*'.<sup>23</sup> As far as her Francophone audience was concerned, whatever Tasma said in French or however she said it, they invariably found it delightful.

The exaggerated praise of *L'Indépendance belge* aside, there can be no doubt that Tasma's celebrity had never been greater than it was in 1892. Like O'Rell, she attracted huge crowds wherever she spoke. Her other activities, however, would soon become increasingly important and time-consuming, with the result that lecturing faded into the background. The last report of her lectures in the Clarke collection is from the *Journal de Roubaix* in April 1893. Her main career as a novelist was well underway, and would continue for the rest of her relatively short life. Auguste fell ill at the end of the year following Jessie's talk on Tasmania and died a few months later on 23 April 1894. His salary as the Brussels correspondent for the *Times* had given them an important, regular income. Since Jessie knew his work well and had no doubt helped him when he was ill, she lost no time in asking if she could take over his role, once again an extraordinary one for a woman at that time. Covering a wide variety of European subjects to order would be a much more demanding job than writing short stories and articles when she felt like

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<sup>21</sup> *Journal de Bruxelles*, 6.2.1889; *Manchester Examiner*, 12.4.1890; *National Observer*, 2.1.1892.

<sup>22</sup> Clarke papers, NLA MS 8363 Box 24, No. 9. 'She speaks French fluently with a pronounced accent, but that is just an added charm.'

<sup>23</sup> 'irresistibly charming in its colonial exoticism'.



it. Nevertheless, with coaching from the manager of the Foreign Department she was taken on and her first article appeared on 14 May, little more than a month after Auguste's death. It was the first of many. Africa and the Belgian Congo were often in the news, and Jessie also spent time in Holland covering Dutch politics.

As we know from the diary Jessie kept from 1889 to 1891, despite her outwardly confident demeanour and her acclaim as a lecturer and novelist, or perhaps partly because of the work all this entailed, privately Jessie often felt burdened and depressed by the various demands made on her. She also worried excessively about the welfare of her siblings. The added pressure of being a *Times* foreign correspondent while still writing novels finally took a toll on her health, which deteriorated seriously from the end of 1896. Jessie suffered a fatal heart attack on 23 October 1897 aged only 49. There were many tributes to her at the time, but like Rosa Praed and Ada Cambridge, two late nineteenth-century women novelists with whom she is often associated, her name is little-known today. Yet, in her day Tasma was almost as well-known for her lectures in Belgium and France as Max O'Rell was in English-speaking countries. They were both more famous abroad than they were at home; what is more, they both gave their talks in a foreign language. O'Rell was certainly 'the biggest thing in years' and gave many more lectures than Tasma in more countries of the world, but today he has been completely forgotten. Although it may sound somewhat frivolous, I cannot help thinking of what Ginger Rogers is reported to have said when hearing the praise always heaped on Fred Astaire: 'Well, I did the same, but backwards and in high heels!' If comparing degrees of difficulty, one would have to say that Tasma did the same as O'Rell but earlier, to learned societies, and as that '*spectacle curieux*'—a woman lecturer.

*Melbourne*

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