

S.T. GILL AND HUBERT DE CASTELLA

COLIN THORNTON-SMITH

This article draws upon material gathered for the author's recently published translation of Hubert de Castella's *Les Squatters australiens* (1861) as *Australian Squatters* with Melbourne University Press. The author is grateful to the National Library of Australia for permission to reproduce the S.T. Gill illustration "Stockman" from the Rex Nan Kivell Collection, and to the State Library of Victoria for permission to reproduce the Hubert de Castella illustration "Squatter rassemblant ses troupeaux" from the La Trobe Collection. Information about Hubert de Castella's artistic activity comes mainly from his largely unpublished "Réminiscences", access to which, here gratefully acknowledged, was generously arranged by Dr Bernard Schnyder de Wartensee, one of his grandsons.

* * *

When Hubert de Castella came to the colony of Victoria in 1854 at his brother Paul's invitation to assist him in running his cattle-fattening station Yering near present-day Yarra Glen, with the prospect of eventually acquiring a station himself, he was throwing over an earlier commitment to a military career.

From a fairly young age he had shown an interest in drawing and painting, but his father Dr Jean-François de Castella had done his best to discourage this, seeing the profession of artist as exemplified by an impecunious character who earned a precarious livelihood making sketches which he sold in local taverns.

The compromise reached was that Hubert could deploy his artistic inclinations by training to be an architect, but Dr de Castella was apparently unaware of the sort of draughtsmanship and solid grounding in mathematics that the profession really required. Thus he sent his son to study under K.A. Heideloff, the famous German restorer of Gothic architecture, who encouraged Hubert's love of sketching this and developed his taste for medieval art. Eventually warned by a French officer friend that this was no proper training for a prospective architect, Dr de Castella next arranged for him to become a pupil in the studio of the famous Hector Lefuel, later to become one of the creators, with Louis Visconti, of the Second Empire style in French architecture.

This move turned out to be even more counter-productive, in that Hubert was now transported to the centre of the artistic world, and rapidly

made contact with various painters. He confesses in *Australian Squatters*¹ that he spent most of his time at the Louvre or in artists' studios, and finally it was again the same friend, by now a general, who warned Dr de Castella that there was no hope of his ever becoming an architect.

When offered a commission in one of the Swiss regiments serving the Bourbon King of Naples, Hubert, whose *ancien régime* and royalist sympathies were outweighed by his infatuation with the French way of life, took the decisive step of being naturalized as a Frenchman with the help of the general in order to enlist for seven years in the army of the new Second Republic with the prestigious First Light Cavalry Regiment. For the next five years, life in a series of provincial garrison towns afforded many opportunities to sketch and paint, while he rose through the ranks to become quartermaster-sergeant and attracted the attention of his superiors by devising a system for mapping on horseback.

Towards the end of 1853 he was placed first on the promotions list to become a sub-lieutenant and it was while on leave waiting for the commission to take effect that he withdrew from the army.

In Australia, paradoxically, his love of the horsy life, architectural velleities and artistic ambitions finally found their full expression. Handling stock and hunting offered all the satisfactions and none of the drawbacks of the French cavalry; by the following year he was busy designing new homesteads for his brother's station and neighbouring Dalry, which he had purchased in partnership with Guillaume de Pury; from his arrival in Australia his artist's eye was caught by the new colours, different light and wild and picturesque landscapes which he could now paint and sketch free from any thought that this was compromising some more serious activity and contradicting his father's wishes.

He would naturally have been attracted to what signs of artistic life existed at the time, and have seen the pictures of S.T. Gill, in particular *Sketches of the Victoria Gold Diggings and Diggers as They Are*.² It was also the habit of the time to display the work of artists in the windows of music sellers' shops, and we know that by 1853 S.T. Gill was holding exhibitions of his works.³

For family reasons Hubert returned to Switzerland early in 1856. He was overjoyed to see Europe again and rejoin his family, but had many happy memories of his stay in Australia. Family circumstances prevented him from re-establishing himself in Paris, although he did spend a few months there in 1860 with his friend Joseph Panton studying painting again. In Switzerland he had continued to paint only in a half-hearted sort of way, and the period up to 1860 was further broken into by trips to England and Italy.

What saved him at this time from living the life of a fairly aimless *rentier* was his decision to write a book about his experiences in Australia. Inspired on the one hand by a suggestion from his father, who may well have seen writing as a more acceptable activity than painting, and on the other by the appearance in 1857 of the melodramatic novel *Les Voleurs d'or* by the comtesse Céleste de Chabrilan, wife of the French consul in Melbourne and notorious ex-courtesan who had arrived there shortly after Hubert himself, he began a series of chapters, the first very short, but the later ones longer as he warmed to his task.

When he came to Paris in 1860 with his completed manuscript, his original intention was to publish at his own expense. He was fortunate to be put into contact with several of the principals of the Hachette publishing house, that had at the beginning of the year launched *Le Tour du Monde*, a weekly magazine on exploration and travel which depended heavily upon illustrative material. This had to take the form of engravings or lithographs at a stage when cheap mass reproduction of acceptable quality photographs was not yet possible.

Hachette expressed great interest in his manuscript, for which they saw a place in their "Bibliothèque des chemins de fer" series, what we would now call paperbacks which were sold primarily, as the name indicates, at railway bookstalls. But their marketing strategy required that parts of the book also be serialized in *Le Tour du Monde*, which meant that suitable illustrative material had to be available. Hubert was able to return to his hotel to fetch a whole album of his Australian sketches, and this seems to have clinched the deal.

Final details were discussed at a lunch at Magny's, the famous literary restaurant of nineteenth-century Paris, at which one of those present was the famous engraver Gustave Doré, doubtless invited as artistic adviser, given that he had already done a number of illustrations for issues of *Le Tour du Monde*.⁴

The illustrations which appeared in three successive issues of *Le Tour du Monde* in 1861 devoted to extracts from *Les Squatters australiens* consisted of nineteen engravings, including a map, from other sources, two engravings made from photographs which would have been supplied by Hubert, seven copied from drawings by him, and one in which the attribution is "from Mitchell and de Castella".

Among the sketches attributed to Hubert was "Squaatter rassemblant ses troupeaux" (Squatter mustering his herds), which is clearly a copy of S. T. Gill's "Stockman" also reproduced here. Hubert has introduced only very minor variations to the elements of Gill's composition, and one assumes that the changed face of the rider is that of his brother Paul.

The one marked difference between the two illustrations is Hubert's addition of a number of tall gum-trees, not simply in keeping with the landscape around Yering, but expressing his own fascination with them which also emerges in several other illustrations and in the text of *Australian Squatters*.

Although Gill produced a number of different versions of the "Stockman" picture, the first dating from 1849,⁵ the one copied did not appear until 1856 in the album *Sketches in Victoria*,⁶ after Hubert had returned to Europe. We must therefore assume that he was either sent a copy of this, or otherwise acquired one before the latter part of 1860.

University of Melbourne

NOTES

1. P. 32.
2. The first part of this, containing twenty-four sketches, was published in Melbourne in 1852, and an English edition was published in 1853. The second part, with a slightly different title, appeared in Melbourne in 1853, and a similar series bringing representation of the diggings and diggers up to 1855 appeared in that year.
3. See Keith Macrae Bowden, *Samuel Thomas Gill Artist*, [n.p.], The Author, 1971, p. 45.
4. To illustrate an anonymous article, "De Sydney à Adélaïde (Australie du Sud) - Notes extraites d'une correspondance particulière" published in a September 1860 issue of *Le Tour du Monde*, Doré had himself adapted two S.T. Gill illustrations, "Native Sepulchre" and "The Found Bushman" from Edward Wilson's *Rambles at the Antipodes* . . . (1859), which also furnished more than half of the text of the ostensible private correspondence. In 1856 he was to copy, adapt or re-create from a number of copies by W.A. Nicholls of Gill's gold-field illustrations in John Sherer's *The Gold-Finder of Australia; How He Went, How He Fared, and How He Made His Fortune*, for an abridged French translation of this called *Les Chercheurs d'or*.
5. See Bowden, p. viii.
6. *Sketches in Victoria* appeared in three parts, with the first two available in May, 1855, while the third, including the "Stockman" picture, was not available until 1856 (see Bowden, p. 124).



'Squatter rassemblant ses troupeaux', La Trobe Collection, State Library of Victoria.



S.T. Gill 'Stockman', Rex Nan Kivell Collection, National Library of Australia.