

## OUT OF OBLIVION

JOHN WHITE

Confessing to an addiction, albeit a challenging one, is a salutary experience, but that in an esoteric sense was my prognosis late in 1985. Let me explain.

Absorbed as I was scanning microfilm, books, charts and maps, the impending closure for stocktaking of the State Library appeared distant and irrelevant. Assuredly my basic research would be accomplished well in advance of that November day. Secure in the rituals of the library with a multitude of pickings rich in potential "findings" I presumed all would be well. Inevitably the fateful day arrived when I felt locked out, cheated, forsaken and ultimately remorseful. Even the popular media, seldom attracted to library matters, proclaimed the closure. Embattled I could at first exact no consolation, but this state proved transitory, gradually being replaced by one of optimism. Following the standard behavioural patterns of any good addict I had marshalled the resources for my next "shot", for were there not other locations literally crammed with vital details just waiting to be unearthed? And as a final resort there remained the cache of background literature in my study.

Early in the development of my addiction and as an integral part of it came an urge to digress down miscellaneous enchanting alleys. Having long been fascinated by "down" statistics, I extracted from official papers lists of goods with prices and causes of death (childhood in the last century was a high risk category for fatal illness and violent death). There were tables available on population, missing returns, accidents, shipping and rainfall. Weather patterns and the dates and effects of natural disasters highlighted the lives of rural dwellers. Occasionally, when in some country cemetery office perusing dates of burial and causes of death, there comes a sense of guilt at the profanity of trespassing into the lives of persons lost in obscurity. More commonly, however, this sensation is forestalled by the informal nature of details on film. For the research addict waverings and doubts are inevitably overshadowed by the call of discovery and the rapture on finding one more piece of the mosaic. Especially when a goal is clear but difficult of attainment, some primitive urge enables us to endure the toil and anguish. Perhaps I can illustrate this syndrome through a short anecdote.

Some years ago I was in a conversation group with a soldier from the First World War when the subject of the fearful trenches came up. Filled with horror I turned expectantly to the old man, but his remark was totally unexpected.

“But, my friends, you have not known the ecstasy one experiences on reaching green fields after all that mud and stench.” Prolonged and frustrating though it may be, my own small search proceeds with visits to the Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages and Church Offices which are part of the time-consuming legwork. There are good moments. For me at least the Titles Office is a place where one may follow the drama of property bought and sold, of growth in prosperity and in some cases loss and destitution. Not the least enthralling is the building itself with caverns dignified and peaceful issuing the odour of decaying paper abutting areas of frenetic energy. Whatever the outcome of any one day’s work the predictable demon intrudes with the gambler’s promise of some titillating revelation. Such in essence is my addiction and here is its genesis.

In May 1985 some strange impulse propelled me to a foolhardy decision, namely to gather together, even at this late stage, the threads of the lives of my maternal grandparents. Little information was available and I lacked the expertise to produce a well conceived plan. My grandfather, Gustave L’Huillier, a very old man as I recall him, was born in France in 1848. Together with his elder sister and two younger brothers, one an infant, he was taken by his mother probably early in October 1852 to London where they were united with their father, who apparently eluded the authorities, leaving France illegally in July or August. Sailing on the *Woodstock* in the same year the family arrived in Port Phillip late in April 1853. Most of Gustave’s early life was spent on his father’s property on Sheepwash Creek near Sandhurst (Bendigo). After enduring years of toil he, at nineteen years of age, decided to leave. Whereupon, bidding his mother goodbye, and with threepence in his pocket he walked away from Sheepwash never to return. Obtaining a position in a local foundry he mastered the techniques of the forge and general ironwork. In 1873 he married Anne Barratt, who had fled Ireland arriving as a young girl in Port Phillip on Black Thursday, 1851. After their marriage Gustave and Anne lived in a small cottage in Sandhurst where their first two children were born. Grippled by the lure of the land Gustave sold his property, bought a team of horses, some vehicles and basic farming supplies and made for Mincha, near Mt Hope. There as farmers they remained until 1916. Returning to Bendigo Gustave purchased a group of houses and some vacant lots to secure an income in retirement. Enveloped by the Great Depression, he, as a landlord, was experiencing financial difficulties when he died in 1932. His wife Anne, who was over ninety years of age, died in 1934. That was the outline, but details of the struggle for survival on marginal land were vague and sketchy. Nevertheless sufficient had lingered in my memory to suggest I might offer these people as “typical” settlers. From history texts and novels I knew of the unlocking of the land, the relevant parliamentary acts and the formalities involved.

Whilst there could be nothing new in revealing failure of crops, droughts, floods, personality clashes and the coming of the railway, the telegraph and irrigation, I sought to present these events by looking into the lives of the group of ordinary people—the Gustave L’Huilliers and their neighbours. Fortuitously two neighbouring families were cousins. Three persons born to those families were alive in late 1885, one a lady of 102 years of age. Of Gustave’s other brothers one became a broker in Sandhurst and two remained at Sheepwash. One of these later became a gardener to the Mitchells of Lilydale and the other lived the life of a hermit on a small riverside holding. The two sisters, the eldest and youngest of the family, remained at home. After the death of those around her Marie Louise spent years on her own. Surviving a brutal attack in her house in 1952 she found refuge in the home of two of her nieces where she remained a recluse keeping to her room virtually incommunicado until her death in 1954. As one of the nieces was my mother a package of family documents mainly in French, dating back to 1842, came into my possession. As a starting point for research I realized that the name L’Huillier, relatively uncommon in our society, would be easily recognizable. Systematically I perused documents often in hard copy from the Lands and other Government departments deemed likely to contain communications with those engaged in primary industry. Progressively records at the Public Record Office, Laverton, revealed letters exchanged, descriptions of property, dates of payments, reminders—a regular plethora of material. Turning to the newspapers I scanned the columns for shareholder lists, especially those concerning gold mining, Agricultural shows, Wine Exhibitions, sporting events and other notices and articles. Sighting the name became a relatively simple operation even when skimreading. Assembling material to form hypotheses became a preoccupation even if many of these were exploded the following day. Each day’s work spawned a number of queries for the next. Observing the inaccuracies notoriously commonplace in many documents I found it essential to countercheck. Where possible I sought more than one record. For instance Gustave and his brothers born in France seldom gave their place of birth and when pressed to do so wrote or spoke a word like “Priz” when in point of fact they were almost certainly born at Praye, south west of Nancy, in the Department of Meurthe.

Visiting Bendigo on one occasion to scrutinize a baptismal register I discovered four L’Huilliers, probably rounded up by a zealous Irish priest, baptised on the same day. Marie Louise 5, Amédée Stanislaus 9, Rémy Gabriel 14 and Michel Désiré 16. Having unearthed this quaint melodrama I called on the offices of the Strathfieldsaye Shire which takes in the Sheepwash. There from old rates records I was presented with Rémy Félix, the landowner and producer, for clearly set out were the details of his first

property, some information on buildings, the saga of his rise from market gardener to vigneron when his rates were high through to the decline in value after the phylloxera incident. Finally those properties that had been so productive fell into the hands of others including a mining company. Reflecting on these details one could appreciate an old man's outrage. With disbelief he and his neighbours witnessed the instantaneous and complete obliteration of an industry often considered second only to gold mining. Fortunately, being enterprising and resourceful, these vigneronns had diversified their resources thereby riding out the crisis without bankruptcy. Rémy Félix invested in blocks of small shops and an interest in the local Stock Exchange.

At about this stage I became aware of the fact that my original plan was breaking down both in direction and emphasis. This became a constant dilemma in my search. Should I exercise a strong discipline over my studies or let the search at times take its head. Most frequently, for good or ill, I have taken this latter course. Surely, I argued, if I were to understand Gustave I must first come to terms with the lives of his mother and father. Taking this turn exposed a daunting task for this would require more intensive background reading on the French Revolution and great events of the early nineteenth century. Documentary evidence outside the family papers would be difficult to obtain and a wider range of newspapers and magazines must be viewed. Using local evidence an apparent contradiction emerged. The naturalization certificate, one of the few family documents in English, was issued in 1862 with the Oath of Allegiance witnessed at Sandhurst by Judge Molesworth. Even the receipt was retained over all those years. Without a doubt this certificate was required to purchase land under the Act of the time, which Rémy Félix did as records attest. Intriguingly, on searching documents from the Australian Archives at Canberra, there emerged a list of persons naturalized in December 1854 on which the name Rémy Félix L'Huillier appears with all details the same except the address, which was at the time Prahran. This is consistent with the facts. The reason given for seeking naturalization was for the purchase of land which became effective in January 1855. One wonders if events of the past impeded the fulfilment of the first naturalization. Surely further investigation is required.

The signatories to the memorandum in 1850 were as follows [spelling as on original papers]:

Casimir Bouchet 96 Great Bourke Street, marchand (a fellow passenger on the *Woodstock*).

Eugene Jourdan similarly described also a passenger on the *Woodstock*.

Charles Mercier, Lonsdale St., East No. 1. marchand, who also appears on

the list of persons naturalized, December, 1854.

Louis Lambert, 44 Great Collins Street, marchand and a German fellow passenger, Henry Boehler, Victoria St., West, North Melbourne, Storekeeper.

An interesting anomaly is that R.F. L'Huillier is described as a stonemason whilst his fellow immigrants appeared to follow their stated professions. It seems strange that this man with many years of business experience sought the occupation of labourer in the new country.

Turning to the second memorandum in 1862 one finds Rémy Félix was about to extend his property. One might conclude that on making application to purchase land he discovered he was not effectively naturalized. The need was urgent. This time he sought the advice of a local solicitor and the signatories were Anglo-Saxon with names such as Nicholson and Smallwood, addresses given being Pall Mall for three of them and nearby Bridge Street for the other two. It would be tempting to assume the signing took place in a convivial environment. It worked.

My recollection of my grandfather was of a rugged Australian countryman but his origins were French. In his life there is the incident of his own naturalization. At fifty-two years of age he was forced by a chain of circumstances to seek Citizenship, an enthralling human story in its own right. For me the comfortably smug Australian, the immigrant or "migrant" was always the stranger. Often I fear I viewed these people in a patronizing manner. Greater knowledge had led me to penetrate the beginnings of my family in the fledgling colony of Victoria. French, foreign, coming to terms with the language, unfamiliar customs and age-old bigotry. Statistics suggest that few French people sought permanent residence and family groups were even fewer. Clinging to her daughters may well have been Elizabeth's only means of experiencing congenial feminine companionship. The visitor most likely to be excluded from the home in many circumstances would be the one who was French. By the 1870s all her children were growing up and she had Marie Barbe as an adult to share her joys and sorrows. Whatever the cause of the family's plight she had not been guilty. Serving their needs and surmounting all the difficulties for love made her, in my opinion, a noble figure.

Having resolved to analyse the history more thoroughly I found myself reading Thiers' *History of the Revolution*, 1845 edition, translated by J. Dixon. Massive and detailed, the first volume, as I perceived it, throbbed with the sensations of the Revolution both enthralling and suspenseful. Characters crossed the stage, some decidedly admirable, others exceedingly repulsive. Ultimately it seemed the ennobling forces of reason together with liberty and equality proved too formidable for a single generation to con-

trol, thereby allowing the upheaval that promised so much to degenerate into mindless cruelty. Soon the perennial dogs of revenge were unleashed to exact horrifying retribution with the profile of an enemy, so clear at first, becoming vague and ill-defined. Over France the guillotine cast a spell like some capricious god demanding sacrificial victims. On the other hand so many victims displayed incredible self-possession and bravery. Contemporaries must inevitably have been affected by the turn and counterturn of events even allowing for the time lag and nature of communications. Jean-Baptiste and his parents would live with memories both exhilarating and fearful. Their reactions to these events and their lifestyle as a result would have been part of Rémy Félix. Add the Imperial wars and the other great events and we meet a Frenchman as he was.

As Thiers presents the scenario through the volumes on the Revolutionary Wars the new people's armies despite terrifying human losses achieved outstanding successes and produced young heroic leaders like Hoche and Napoleon Bonaparte. Let us not forget that in spite of the ambivalence of its leaders and the temporary demise of republicanism the French had activated the cause of the common man and woman and this revolution continues. It is possible that Rémy Félix, having spent a number of his formative years in the atmosphere of a politically explosive Paris, would have assimilated some of the extreme views pervading that city. Reading various other accounts of the years of revolution, war and restoration I was confirmed in my views.

Jean-Baptiste his father would almost certainly have been conscripted into the army. Thus if he had learnt the trade of furrier it would have served him well in the cavalry. Contemporary accounts tell of the furriers of the time performing services now exclusive to veterinary surgeons. More importantly Rémy Félix would have heard tales of "La Terreur" and the wars. Fear of being involved would have pervaded provincial lore. He would know that political activists ran great risks.

Turning to his flight and using newspapers, Lloyds of London, the Guildhall Library and the British Record Office for details I located the L'Huillier family on the Quebec built clipper *Woodstock* sailing from the Port of London bound for Port Phillip. They were heady times, for consignments of gold from the Victorian goldfields made news as heavy loads were drawn through the streets to the vaults of the Bank of England followed by cheering and inquisitive crowds. There were tales of fortunes won in a few hours of violence and crime on the streets of Melbourne and of ships abandoned in the Bay as crews deserted for the goldfields. Bendigo Creek had made the word Bendigo magic. It was December 1852 when the voyage began. The steerage ticket with the price paid, fifty-one pounds, is one of the family

heirlooms. Some consolation may be found from the evidence that paying steerage passengers had relatively comfortable quarters by the standards of the times. Reading accounts of clippers provided me with an interesting diversion. Only the barest details of the long delays at Deal and Portsmouth can be found but contemporary records speak of abnormally violent storms off Deal experienced by ships leaving within days of the *Woodstock*.

The nagging question remains:

Why would parents with children aged 6, 4, 2 and 7 months leave France to undertake a journey so long and perilous? One must admire the fortitude and loyalty of Elizabeth, but that is only part of the story. Passports show Elizabeth and the children travelling on a valid external passport whilst Rémy carried only an internal one to Le Havre. Intriguingly the former was issued at Epinal, the administrative centre of the Department of Vosges, with the place of residence given as Mirecourt in the same department. The latter was issued at Praye, Department of Meurthe, where Rémy Félix conducted his business.

To some extent one may assume a reasonably congenial French environment aboard the *Woodstock* by examining the Passenger List with ages and declared occupational status:

Rémy Félix L'Huillier	30	Merchant
Elizabeth L'Huillier	26	Wife

(Here follow the names and ages of the children:- Marie Barbe 6, Gustave Félix 4, Eugène Auguste 2 and Edmond Benjamin, infant).

Julie Ménard	43	Lady
Henry Mocht	34	Clerk
Casimir Bouchet	35	Merchant
Eugène Jourdan	29	Merchant
Robert Macdona	28	Gentleman
Sarah Macdona	26	Wife
(name partly obliterated)	30	Servant

As the form had no column for foreigners Captain Williams, the Master, created one in which he listed the 19 adults and 4 children. The only two nationalities recorded were French and German. They were a minority group in a passenger complement of around 300 persons. There were 63

children from 1 to 14 years of age and 16 infants aboard, the L'Huilliers being the only foreign children. It appears obvious the Macdonas brought a servant. For the researcher there is a treasure trove of tales as fourteen other ships arrived in Port Phillip within days of the *Woodstock* and twenty lay at anchor in Hobson's Bay.

Returning to the earlier life of my subject I became aware of a deficiency in my knowledge of Paris. Having visited it merely as a tourist my knowledge of modern Paris at first hand was minimal. Nevertheless it was an older city I must discover. For this purpose I examined plans and maps dating back as far as 1771. The streets where Rémy lived and worked have disappeared but may still be located on older plans. Turning to the persons who undoubtedly influenced the young man I read about Pierre Louis DeLaval, the artist, under whose guidance he spent four and a half years. The much decorated older DeLaval would have been a patriarchal figure in the home. Pierre Louis, a pupil of Girodet, worked with his master on many projects such as "La Force" and "La Justice". Having been exempted from military service by Imperial Decree because of his work for Napoleon he went on to paint historical subjects, mythology and portraits. His works hang in cathedrals, churches, palaces, including Versailles, and public and private galleries. A portrait of Rémy Félix in oils in 1840 has been the prize heirloom in the L'Huillier family and this was the pride and joy of Marie Louise to her death in 1954. One may be tempted to wonder if the young man had been used as a model though his "apprenticeship" appears to have concerned business matters. By a twist of fate Rémy Félix himself was exempted from military service when his time arrived but in less spectacular circumstances than those of his master. He should surely have been advantaged in his early work life through his association with a notable and highly respected family.

Following his time of preparation he worked as a quasi personal secretary to Jules (known as Count) Migeon, a publisher, journalist, novelist and critic with aspirations to a political career. Rémy Félix served this man only seven years his senior satisfactorily for 18 months through 1843 and 1844 as a testimonial reveals. Some years after Rémy Félix and Jules Migeon parted, this man took up his political career. He survived a condemnation by a court for falsely claiming a certain title but on making a disclaimer and apology he retained a title and resumed his career in politics. What Rémy Félix knew of this is mere conjecture.

Returning to his native province of Meurthe Rémy married some time in 1845 and became a businessman and proprietor in the commune of Praye, canton of Véselize. Not far distant were his birthplace St Firmin, Xérocourt, where his father and mother lived, and the fine old town of Haroué where

the Poives resided—Elizabeth's place of birth. Their first child was born in March 1846. There is concrete evidence he was at Praye in 1847 and 1852. On some documents they gave their place of marriage as Nancy. Disregarding the precise reason for their flight of 1852 one can study the atmosphere of the times sometimes described as a twilight period when agents of Louis Napoleon detained suspected opponents who were often summarily tried and sentenced to exile. As those who were freed were generally placed under police surveillance this would have been unthinkable for a family businessman. There may well have been a further category, namely those who were given the opportunity to choose voluntary exile. Life in a distant British colony would have been preferable to Algeria. Possibly as a device to avoid detection Rémy and Elizabeth gave their place of origin as Mirecourt on most documents they dealt with in the Colony of Victoria. There is little doubt that "incident" of the past cast a malign shadow over their lives.

To appreciate the Sandhurst environment of the time I considered it essential to gather and study charts of gold reefs and the activities accompanying the great mining boom. George Lansell, the best known and perhaps the most adventurous entrepreneur, held a large property not far from Sheepwash Creek and the town of Mandurang. There had been alluvial mining along the creek but it had not been intensive or frantic enough to cause the devastation wrought on Bendigo Creek. It was left to later times for its beauty to be erased. The mining companies took out leases along the creek later in the century as improved technology enabled them to expand and modernise their operations.

I believe the L'Huilliers, with the passing of time, came to terms with local culture as it was emerging but their contribution to it was typically French through a display of skills in viticulture and horticulture. In the 1870s, a more relaxed Rémy Félix opened his garden, orchard and vineyard to the judges at the National Show held at Sandhurst, being awarded several first and second prizes for produce and presentation. Not unexpectedly it was noted that no outsiders were employed, the whole enterprise being in the hands of the family. It was the typical French family business, for a vineyard and winery would be a complex operation. So far I have found no evidence of prize winning wines from the L'Huillier vineyard, but his neighbouring vigneronns were successful exhibitors locally and overseas.

In 1954 I observed a heavy ledger book, headings neatly presented in French with detailed records of expenses and income. Even the cost of a meal when visiting Sandhurst for market was scrupulously recorded. Being the only local evidence of his bookkeeping skills it is a misfortune that this heirloom defies all efforts to rediscover it.

Digressing to genealogical sources it is possible to find a number of L'Huilliers from various regions of France, two with their family coats-of-arms. From descriptions given I am convinced none of those listed could be antecedents of the L'Huilliers of the Sheepwash. One interesting character emerges out of the mist of the past who in 1793 was the Procureur Syndic of the Department (Paris) and a spokesman for the people before the Convention. He was an associate of Chaumette, a devotee of the worship of the goddess of Reason and one of those active in urging the hierarchy and clergy to sign the oath abjuring Catholicism. Having supported some less than successful causes and having opposed Robespierre he probably went to the Guillotine in 1794. This temptingly colourful additive I must reluctantly reject. One might collect thriller "throw away" stories based on a single surname.

Gathering what information I could I perceived Rémy's first property on Upper Sheepwash Creek, one of the largest of the first release with a gentle slope down to a substantial creek frontage where the water flowed straight and clear also backing onto two surveyed roads. For this whiteman trespasser it was a valuable prize under the 1842 Act (N.S.W.). Sandhurst was a mere three years old as a settlement and ten kilometres away across the range the "diggers" toiled on oblivious of land other than a few square metres of potentially auriferous earth. The remainder of the settlement was made up of the government camp, tent businesses, the growing Chinese camp and the quarters of officials, troopers and section of a British camp unit. Few persons were interested in agriculture. The verdant banks of the once beautiful Bendigo Creek had been transformed into mud holes and heaps of earth and rock and the fine stand of trees had been decimated. Dust at times dominated the whole environment. Doubtless Rémy Félix held a miner's licence but no record of one has at this stage been uncovered. Other Frenchmen were to reach the Sheepwash, the best known being Jean-Baptiste Loridan who began the establishment of a large vineyard in 1859. Many other vinegrowers were German. Aerial photographs provide a graphic outline of the Upper Sheepwash where Rémy Félix remained for fifty years.

Rémy Félix retained his bourgeois faith in property which he passed on to his children. Each of them including Marie Louise is listed at the Titles Office as the owner at one stage of a moderately large estate. The residue of the estate of Rémy Félix was valued in 1955 at around sixty thousand pounds.

In human terms the fading away of members of this family makes a depressing tale. Elizabeth, the long suffering wife and mother who had produced eight living children and two who died as babies, passed away on

30 October 1905—an inquest describing the cause of death as senility. A week later her eldest daughter and constant companion joined her mother. Again an inquest was called, but as Amédée the son had brought a doctor to her the cause of death was put down to respiratory illness. Four years later Rémy Félix died with the inevitable inquest. The same conditions prevailed at the deaths of the two unmarried sons.

Dissenter, rebel, political activist or unfortunate outcast, Rémy Félix was always sufficiently affluent to provide well for himself and family and to live the bourgeois style. Having been in the business of retailing food items and other essentials he would have had the opportunity to observe the poorer peasants, the labourers and tenants suffering near starvation and misery in his own commune and canton. For an individual of his time he had the good fortune when young to have travelled and associated with the powerful. Perhaps his prominence led to his downfall. Interestingly records show other members of the family as active participants in local politics.

To complete this brief glimpse into a pioneer Frenchman's life let me quote from the report of the Judges from the National Show 1876. "The vineyard was well staked with ironbark stakes. The land was trenched in strips 2 inches wide, 18 inches deep and ploughed between ... The vines consist principally of hermitage, madiera, burgundy, chabelais .... The wines are not quite pure but a good portion is nearly so ... The whole property was a perfect model of neatness and high cultivation and more resembled a first class nursery".

In the meantime I must proceed both with the organization of the material assembled and continue with further research. At this stage I have accepted Rémy Félix as the central figure in the biography. Whilst, as I have indicated above, this may not be my final decision it provides a worthwhile starting point. Apart from time lines, and other planning controls I have divided the evidence into the sections stated below:

- French background covering significant national and family events from the French Revolution to the period of the flight of Rémy Félix L'Huillier
- In London, the voyage to Port Phillip and the twenty months when the family address was Lang Street, Prahran
- On the Sheepwash from January 1855 to the phylloxera incident and the destruction of the vines
- The last years

- Highlights on the life of Gustave Félix L'Huillier and other members of the family through to the death of Marie Louise in 1954.

Allowing for a minimum of unexpected problems and delays in research and planning, I am to produce a first draft of the biography by the end of 1986 or in the first months of the following year. Already I have written experimental drafts of small sections of the work.

As a final comment I wish to record that at one stage of my endeavours when the deciphering of handwriting and translation proved to be beyond my expertise hopefully I approached Dr Colin Nettelbeck of Monash University. For the assistance and positive encouragement he provided I wish to express my appreciation and gratitude. Whereas I was seriously contemplating the abandonment of the project now I am determined to assess the contribution of one French family to this nation.

*Melbourne*