

Juliette Lopès-Rastoul-Henry

Yannick Lageat and Les Hetherington

The last issue of *The French Australian Review* contained an article about the above person who, for almost a quarter of a century, was a successful ambassadress of French culture in Australia. In a brief biographical sketch, Claude Cornet even speaks of a 'fascinating woman'¹. At left is a portrait that honours her great distinction: this photograph by Barcroft Carpel Boake² dates from about 1881 so is therefore after her marriage to the artist Lucien Henry who actively participated in the defence of the Paris Commune in 1871 and who was deported to the Ducos Peninsular in New Caledonia; after receiving a remission of sentence, he settled in Sydney in June 1879.



Collection: Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences

¹ Exhibition catalogue *Regards de femmes*, Nouméa Museum, 1998, p. 167.

² Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.

Before meeting Lucien Henry, Juliette was the companion of another Communard, Paul Rastoul, sentenced to remain on the Isle of Pines; he tried in vain to obtain a less harsh sentence. This is why she visited Victor Hugo on two occasions to ask for his help, 17 January and 25 June 1872, but the process undertaken by the republican writer resulted in no more than a hope for a general amnesty. In October 1873, with her two children from a previous relationship, Angèle and José Lopès, she joined Doctor Rastoul in Noumea. Rastoul had been permitted to establish himself successfully at the headquarters of the colony, but he was soon returned to the Isle of Pines after the spectacular escape of six Communards sentenced to imprisonment on the Isle of Pines (one of them, Henri Rochefort, went to Newcastle in New South Wales, Australia). While Juliette, suspected of having helped them, was deported to Sydney, Rastoul perished at sea, with eighteen other deportees, trying to escape from their place of detention.

Recent research at the *Bibliothèque historique de Paris* has resulted in the discovery of a letter which Juliette had entrusted to her son José who went to Europe in 1878:

Paris Villa, Sydney, 15 janvier 1878

Cher citoyen et grand maître Victor Hugo,

Vers le noble et grand proscrit, permettez à l'humble exilée, à l'amie dévouée des prisonniers politiques, de vous adresser son fils, non pour être une charge - le travail dans l'exil me permettra, j'espère, de subvenir à ses premiers besoins - mais à vous l'adresser pour que vous le protégiez, lui l'enfant adoptif, mais chéri, du cher Rastoul, qui trouva la mort dans les flots de l'Océan en Calédonie, en allant, non pas chercher la liberté pour lui seul, mais le moyen en pays libre de sauver ou de délivrer ses malheureux compagnons de proscription.

Je laisse la parole à l'enfant, et d'ici sur ce rocher d'Australie, je vois notre grand poète, notre noble chef, celui qui a dit : « J'offre aux vaincus l'abri, aux proscrits l'asile, je l'offre à tous. » Je le vois, dis-je, l'offrir à l'enfant orphelin. Agréez, citoyen et noble républicain, les hommages les plus respectueux de celle qui a gardé de vous le plus doux souvenir,

J. Lopès-Rastoul³

³ *Bibliothèque historique de la ville de Paris*, coll. Clarétie, Ms 1141.

Paris Villa, Sydney, 15 January 1878

Dear citizen and great master, Victor Hugo,

To the great and noble fugitive, please permit a humble exile, a devoted friend of political prisoners, to send you my son, not as a burden—my work in exile will allow me, I hope, to provide for his basic needs—but to speak to you to ask you to protect him, the adopted but cherished child of dear Rastoul, who died under the waves of the (Pacific) Ocean in Caledonia [sic], escaping, not to seek liberty for himself alone, but to find a way in a free country to save or set free his unhappy banished companions.

I leave it to the child to explain, and from here on this Australian rock, I can see our great poet, our noble leader, he who said: 'I offer shelter to the vanquished, asylum to fugitives, shelter to all'. I see this, I tell myself, as an offer to this orphaned child.

Please accept, dear citizen and noble republican, sincere respects from she who has retained the fondest memories of you.

J. Lopès-Rastoul

It is not known whether José was received at rue de Clichy in Paris or whether he went to Guernsey where Hugo, suffering from a stroke, stayed from 4 July to 9 November. But this letter confirms the astonishing assurance this daughter of the people was able to invoke during her lifetime in order to command the attention of those in power, to present her political convictions or to carry out her cultural activities.

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