

# The Reception of Louise Michel in Australia

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This article addresses the reception of Louise Michel in Australia from an anecdotal and then a political perspective. The anecdotal concerns the reception that Michel received in September 1880 when she passed through Australia on her return from exile in New Caledonia, as recounted in her memoirs of her brief experiences in Sydney and Melbourne. More significantly, the article explores the representation of Michel's ideas and activism in the print media in Australia, at a time when newspapers played such an influential role in the transmission of news and the formation of opinion. The Australian press devoted over two thousand articles and items of news to her in the twenty-five years from late 1880 to early 1905, from the time of her return to France to the year of her death. In a period of rapid political and social change in Australia, Michel became a reference point and a touchstone for discussion about key issues of the day: the rise of the workers' movement, the new ideologies of anarchism and socialism, women's rights, all could be viewed and discussed through the prism of her character, ideas and actions. She was 'good to think with' in Lévi-Strauss's terms, 'bon à penser', whether the example she set was cited as a danger to be feared or, more rarely, as a model to be emulated. As a French woman subject to the political and judicial systems of the Third Republic, she was, moreover, a means through which, on occasion, the 'illiberal' French regime could be unfavourably compared to the tolerance of dissent and freedom of speech that was said to prevail in Britain and, by extension, Australia.

Louise Michel was born in 1830, the illegitimate daughter of the son of the Demahis family and a family servant. Brought up and educated by the Demahis grandparents, who were imbued with the liberal ideas of the Enlightenment, she became a primary school teacher, moving to Paris in 1857 where she became closely involved with the radical circles of opposition to the Second Empire. During the Paris Commune (18 March to 28 May 1871), she was a tireless and inspiring figure, enthusiastic proponent of radical reforms to education, justice and the Church, *ambulantière* and combatant (La Fournière 1986, 79–91). Some historians have questioned Michel's account of her activities, particularly as at her trial, to spare others, she claimed responsibility for actions and publications that were not hers (Schulkind 1982, 137–138). This article, however, is less concerned with the accuracy of the Michel legend than with the representation of the ideals and actions of the Communards and particularly of the Communist women, in the Australian press and in the occasional monograph.

In the decade leading up to the Commune, Michel's name does not occur at all in the Australian press; she was after all simply an obscure school teacher living in Belleville. During the siege and the Commune, the difficulty of getting news out of Paris limited the information available: the first articles about the founding of the Commune were published in Australia only in mid-April 1871; news of its violent suppression only in mid-June. Although the accounts were generally accompanied by virulent denunciation of the programme and actions of the Communards, some ambiguity surrounded the reporting of the 'Women of the Commune', title of an article that first appeared in a workers' paper in early August 1871.<sup>1</sup> Recounting the passage through the Rue de la Paix of twenty to thirty Communistes being marched to their probable death, the reporter described the defiant air of one young woman whose proud and fearless demeanour was 'in marked contrast to the cowardly crew that followed her', the jeering crowd that included many women. This article was reprinted in several papers including the Sydney *Evening News*.<sup>2</sup> Even the *pétroleuses* found some sympathy in an article in *The Sydney Morning Herald*

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<sup>1</sup> *The Wallaroo Times and Mining Journal* (Port Wallaroo, SA), 2 August 1871, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Evening News* (Sydney), 22 August 1871, p. 3.

which argued that the Commnard women must have been driven to their desperate actions by misery and want.<sup>3</sup>



Louise Michel, by J. M. Lopez, date unknown, probably between 1860–1880. Public Domain.

The first mention of Louise Michel in the Australian press occurred in February 1872, following her trial and sentence to ‘déportation perpétuelle dans une enceinte fortifiée’. Several papers reported her sentence, some referring to her as ‘a defiant heroine’,<sup>4</sup> or as ‘a woman of high attainments and good position’.<sup>5</sup> Sentenced to transportation to New Caledonia, one of over four thousand Communards consigned to live out their lives in that far distant colony, Michel left France on board the *Virginie* on 28 August 1873.

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<sup>3</sup> ‘La Petroleuse’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 August 1871, p. 6. Reprinted from the *Graphic*.

<sup>4</sup> *South Australian Register* (Adelaide), 14 February 1872, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> *The Toowoomba Chronicle and Queensland Advertiser*, 2 March 1872, p. 4.

The Australian press noted the presence on board this vessel of Henri Rochefort but not of Michel, presumably not well enough known to attract similar notice.<sup>6</sup>

Jill Donohoo (2013), Barry McGowan (2018) and Alexis Bergantz (2018) have retraced the deep hostility in Australia towards the presence of the penal colony on New Caledonia and the fear that escaped convicts would make their way to the British colonies. However, the escape of Communards to Australia—even though they were almost invariably referred to as communists—met with a mixed response. When the deportee Michel Sérigné jumped ship in Melbourne in May 1873, and Henri Rochefort and his five companions escaped to Newcastle in March 1874, most newspaper reports sought to allay the possible fears of the good citizens by explaining the difference between political prisoners and ordinary convicts. Sérigné's cause 'touched the hearts of many Melbourne citizens', writes Barry McGowan (2018, 9); several papers published the account by Marcus Clarke of Sérigné's escape and also letters from the deportees complaining of the conditions on board *L'Orne*.<sup>7</sup> It was perhaps these reports that led to a public fund in aid of the scurvy-stricken prisoners, money which the captain refused to accept (Dauphiné 2006, 22–23). Rochefort was pronounced by the *Evening News* (Sydney) to be 'a gentleman' who had been led astray by the violent passions of the crowd.<sup>8</sup> The liberal reception given to these escapees offered even conservative papers the opportunity to compare favourably Britain's (and by extension Australia's) tradition of protecting free speech to France's repression of the Communards. Unfavourable comparison between the French and British treatment of political dissent was a theme that was to recur in relation to Louise Michel.

Although papers such as *The Sydney Morning Herald* had regular correspondents in New Caledonia, very little was reported about conditions for the Communards on the island. Rochefort and his companions did not give detailed accounts of the experiences of the deportees to the Australian

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<sup>6</sup> *Evening News* (Sydney), 20 October 1873, p. 2. Rochefort's literary and political career as editor of the satirical *Lanterne* and his frequent fines and prison terms had been widely reported in the Australian press in the decade prior to the Commune.

<sup>7</sup> 'The Communist Exiles', *Mercury* (Hobart, Tasmania), 30 April 1873, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> 'Character of M. Rochefort', *Evening News* (Sydney), 30 March 1874, p. 2.

press, except to explain the differences between their treatment and that of the ordinary convicts. Louise Michel reproduced in her memoirs (1886, 309–311) a letter she wrote to her ‘chers amis’ in Australia in April 1875, in which she described the humiliations, violence and privations to which the deportees were subject following Rochefort’s escape; she claimed that the letter reached Sydney where it was published in the left-leaning *Revue australienne*. However, the *Revue australienne*, which ran for only nine issues, ceased publication in late 1874, and extensive searches have not revealed where or if her letter was indeed published in Australia. Julian Thomas, ‘The Vagabond’, who was sent to New Caledonia by *The Sydney Morning Herald* to cover the Kanak rebellion of 1878, published an account of meeting the exiled Communards, including Louise Michel, in *Cannibals and Convicts* (1887). His description of her as a ‘mad fanatic’ who was nevertheless to be admired for her ‘entire abnegation of self’ rehearsed many of the themes that would become commonly attached to her name (127).

### **Louise Michel in Australia**

July 1880 saw the liberation of the remaining Communards, including Michel who, although amnestied in December 1879, had refused to leave New Caledonia until all the deportees were freed (Dauphiné 2006, 91). Having received news of her mother’s ill health, she was desperate to return as quickly as possible to France and petitioned the director of the detention centre to allow her to leave by the mail boat to Sydney, in order to take a faster and more direct route to Europe via London. Most of the other Communards were to leave on the French frigate *Navarin*, which would take a more circuitous route but was free. Michel raised enough money to travel steerage on the monthly mail boat, the steamship *City of Melbourne*, which left Noumea on 4 September 1880 and arrived in Sydney on 8 September. Despite later accounts suggesting that she spent a longer time in Sydney, she was there for less than a week before leaving for Melbourne on the *John Elder* on 14 September. These dates can be confirmed through the notices of shipping arrivals and departures.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The author thanks Ismet Kurtovitch and the staff at the *Archives de Nouvelle-Calédonie* for their help in establishing details of Michel’s departure from New Caledonia.

As the *City of Melbourne* approached the heads, Michel was overwhelmed by the beauty of Sydney Harbour, as she still recalled eighteen years later:

Voilà comment je vis Sydney avec son port si magnifique de grandeur, que je ne crois pas avoir encore rien vu d'aussi splendide. Des rochers de granit rose pareils à des tours géantes laissant entre eux une porte comme pour les Titans, comme à Nouméa, comme à Rome, sept collines bleu pâle sous le ciel. On ne peut se lasser de regarder, tant c'est un magique décor (Michel 1898, 390).<sup>10</sup>

In her memoirs Michel recounts a meeting with Mme Henry (formerly Mme Rastoul) and other friends, and a trip outside Sydney through the never-ending forests of gum trees and eucalyptus (1886, 361). Her naturalist interests (she had recorded the fauna and flora of New Caledonia) were disappointed, however: she regretted not seeing kangaroos or whip snakes. A possibly unreliable obituary in *The Sydney Morning Herald* claimed that, during her time in Sydney, Michel stayed at a restaurant in Pitt Street, already demolished by the time of her death in January 1905.<sup>11</sup>

Claiming that the French consul was not disposed to allow her to leave Sydney with nineteen other former deportees, Michel writes that she threatened to give lectures on 'toutes les infamies commises par Aleyron et Ribourt, aussi les causes de la révolte canaque, [et] la traite des noirs'; the consul preferred to send her quickly on her way (Michel 1898, 391).<sup>12</sup> Her presence in Sydney had not gone entirely unnoticed by the press, since the *Daily Telegraph*, reporting the departure of the *John Elder*, noted that it had taken on board:

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<sup>10</sup> 'That is how I saw Sydney with such a grand and magnificent harbour that I don't think I have yet seen anything as splendid. Cliffs of rose-coloured granite like giant towers opening an entrance for Titans, as in Noumea, as in Rome, seven hills shining pale blue in the sun. One cannot tire of gazing at so magical a landscape.'

<sup>11</sup> 'Obituary. Louise Michel. London, January 10'. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 January 1905, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Colonel Aleyron and Admiral Ribourt were sent to New Caledonia to re-establish discipline after the escape of Rochefort and his companions.

the last of the communists (not to be confounded with the convicts). Amongst them was the celebrated Louise Michel, condemned for having taken part in the Commune at Paris, and known by her writings on the subject of the education of the youthful Republican generation. The deportees sang the Marseillaise and gave a cheer for Australia.<sup>13</sup>

The *John Elder* called at Melbourne where Michel was able to spend a few days before it left there on 21 September, allowing her to offer a comparison between the two major cities.<sup>14</sup>

### The ‘celebrated’ Louise Michel

It is not clear, in the quotation from the *Daily Telegraph* above, whether Louise Michel was already ‘celebrated’ and ‘known by her writings on the subject of education’ in Australia or whether this was identifying information inserted by the journalist. It is unlikely that any of Michel’s few publications to this point were widely available in Australia. However, from the time of her return to France in November 1880, the number of articles in the Australian press devoted to reporting her activities and ideas soared: a Trove search identifies over two thousand in the period from her return until her death in early 1905; by far the largest number were published in the decade between late 1880 and 1890.<sup>15</sup>

This high number can in part be explained by the fact that the Australian newspapers constantly reprinted one another’s articles and frequently published items taken from the English press such as *The Pall Mall Gazette*, which they assumed would be of interest to their readers.<sup>16</sup> Some of the Australian papers, moreover, had their own correspondents in Paris who sent regular reports of French social and political life and in which accounts of

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<sup>13</sup> *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 15 September 1880, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Sydney ‘est déjà une vieille ville. Melbourne même sent l’Europe; mais une Europe lavée par les flots’ (Sydney ‘is already an old town. Melbourne itself has the feel of Europe; but a Europe rinsed by the waves’) (Michel 1886, 362).

<sup>15</sup> 1 January 1881–31 December 1890: 1,508 items. 1 January 1891–31 December 1900: 243; 1 January 1901–31 January 1905: 256. Results of a Trove search for the phrase ‘Louise Michel’ appearing anywhere in the article.

<sup>16</sup> The *Pall Mall Gazette* followed Michel’s activities and speeches particularly closely (Bantman 2017, 998).

Louise Michel's latest activities frequently appeared: *The Sydney Morning Herald* hosted the monthly column 'Continental Gossip' by 'Stella'; the Melbourne *Argus* had a regular column on French life as did the Perth *Daily News*, which published 'Our Paris Letter'. The extent of Michel's notoriety may be measured by the fact that news about her could appear in a column entitled 'Celebrities of the Day'.<sup>17</sup> Dozens of these articles were lengthy, sometimes transcriptions of interviews with Michel or recapitulations of her life, evidence of a fascination, almost an obsession with trying to account for her ideas and the life choices she had made.

The first challenge in examining the representation of Louise Michel in the Australian press is to recognise the bias produced by the political and ideological orientation of the newspapers, not only in relation to France and the regimes in place there but also in relation to developments in Australia. These divergences can be seen in reactions to the amnesties of 1879 and 1880. The *Queensland Times*, preoccupied with the presence of foreigners in the colony, undertook a contentious comparison between Communards and 'Chinamen': it was hostile to both but considered the French, as the 'sworn foes of all laws', the worse threat.<sup>18</sup> For the radical *Ballarat Courier*, published in the city of the Eureka stockade, the 'communists' were political prisoners, their liberation 'a decided gain for the cause of freedom'.<sup>19</sup> The popular, high-circulation *Evening News* (Sydney) offered a more nuanced comment on the political activity of the Communards: 'The ends were noble but the principles were unsound, and the practical means adopted to work out the ends were very evil'.<sup>20</sup>

The divergences between the papers again became clear as they reacted to Michel's triumphant return to Paris in November 1880 and attempted to explain to Australian readers the reasons for the outpouring of emotion

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<sup>17</sup> 'Celebrities of the Day', *Leader* (Melbourne), 15 January 1881, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> '[The communists] are sure to find their way to the mainland of Australia as birds of prey, of keen scent and predatory instincts. Chinamen, if not highly moral and refined, are as a rule peaceable, industrious, and law-abiding; while French Communists, like Russian Nihilists, are the sworn foes of all laws, Divine and human; they recognise no rights and no duties.' 'Jottings and Gleanings', *Queensland Times*, 29 June 1880, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> *Ballarat Courier*, 6 May 1879, p. 2. No title.

<sup>20</sup> 'Communists and Convicts', *Evening News*, 3 June 1879, p. 2.



that accompanied it. The *Herald's* 'Stella', who displayed a decided bias against the more radical forms of the French Republic and was accused by the *Revue australienne* of nostalgia for the Empire,<sup>21</sup> described Michel on her return as 'one of the furies of the Commune' who now 'breathes only vengeance' and preaches 'the sacred duty of assassinating all who differ from her'.<sup>22</sup> Victoria's more liberal *Leader* explained her popularity thus: 'in the estimation of those who knew her best, and who witnessed her self-sacrificing and courageous services in a period of terrible tribulation, she was a heroine'.<sup>23</sup> For other papers she was a 'very dangerous virago',<sup>24</sup> a 'socialistic Egeria',<sup>25</sup> or 'a kind of petticoat-clad Peter the Hermit, preaching the anti-social crusade on the heights of Belleville'.<sup>26</sup> The papers referred to her interchangeably as anarchist, socialist and communist, although the occasional article did attempt to explain the differences between these political ideologies. However, since Michel herself saw these ideologies as not necessarily contradictory but as steps towards ultimate liberation, this confusion is perhaps understandable.<sup>27</sup>

### **The 'leading representative of the Women's Rights movement'**

She was presented above all to the Australian public as the 'leading representative of the Women's Rights movement in [France]' and it is this aspect of the reporting on Michel's activism that is the focus of this article.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> 'Stella' was frequently criticised by the *Revue australienne* for vituperative and inaccurate reports on French political life. The *Revue*, assuming that it could indeed detect a woman's hand at work, asserted: 'Nous trouvons aussi dans ces méchantes et ridicules élucubrations malsaines, certaines allures caractéristiques de la race féline'. 'Comment on écrit l'histoire', *Revue australienne*, n° 4, March 1874, p. 31.

<sup>22</sup> 'Continental Gossip (from our correspondent "Stella") Paris, dec 3', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 January 1881, p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> 'Celebrities of the Day', *Leader* (Melbourne), 15 January 1881, p. 2.

<sup>24</sup> 'The Queen of Montmartre', *The Goulburn Herald and Chronicle*, 21 February 1881, p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> 'Gambetta and Rochefort', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 January 1881, p. 7.

<sup>26</sup> 'France', *Argus* (Melbourne), 2 February 1881, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> In an interview with Louise Michel included in 'The Biographer, Louise Michel, the French Anarchist', *Leader* (Melbourne), 13 June 1885, p. 37.

<sup>28</sup> 'Continental Gossip (from our correspondent "Stella")', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 September 1882, p. 4.

Michel was throughout her life a tireless campaigner for women's rights to education and work, and for equality with men in labour and political struggle; she called for the founding of the *Ligue Internationale des Femmes Révolutionnaires* (1882), and she associated throughout her life with a wide range of feminist causes and prominent feminists. She disclaimed the term 'feminist', however, since political rights for women did not accord with the anarchism she embraced after the suppression of the Commune. In the last year of her life she declared to a journalist:

On a souvent répété que j'étais féministe. Je ne suis pas féministe. Pourquoi réclamer, en effet, pour les femmes des droits politiques puisque, dans l'anarchie future, il n'y aura plus de gouvernement, plus d'autorité? (Quoted in Verhaege 2017, 21.)<sup>29</sup>

Such disavowal did not prevent sections of the French press—and not only the most conservative ones—from using the case of Louise Michel to discredit the feminist cause, as Sidonie Verhaege demonstrates (2017, 24–26). The Australian press was to display a similar tendency to make of the figure of Michel the archetypal feminist, all the better to discredit the movement that in the 1880s was burgeoning in Australia.

This period saw the beginning of a debate in Australia over the granting of political rights to women: suffrage societies were formed in many cities and country towns, ensuring that 'the "woman question" came up everywhere' (Kingston 1978, 92). The first trade unions for women workers were founded,<sup>30</sup> and a timid re-examination of women's roles began, as the movement of women out of domestic service into industry, retailing and clerical work accelerated (Oldfield 1992, 14). These tentative steps often met with resistance, even ridicule, in the press, since it was also the period Marilyn Lake describes as 'the great years of the men's press in Australia' (Lake 1986, 130). Since men outnumbered women in the population by more than

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<sup>29</sup> 'It has often been said that I was a feminist. I am not a feminist. Why, indeed, should I claim political rights for women since, in the anarchy of the future, there will no longer be a government, no longer any authority?'

<sup>30</sup> The Victorian Tailoresses Union was formed in 1882. In 1884 the ITUC (Intercolonial Trade Union Congress) was attended for the first time by women delegates.

two to one, and were inevitably the target readership, the papers showed little sympathy in the early to mid 1880s for the aspirations of women to take part in Australian public and political life. If that notable bastion of masculinist culture, *The Bulletin*, founded in 1880, promoted a particularly extreme image of the virile national character, untrammelled by female distractions or even presence, elevating ‘the carefree roaming life [...] to an heroic status’ (Lake 1986, 125), a more general view prevailed across the Australian press of a necessary division between the public sphere and the private sphere of the home to which women naturally belonged (Walker 1976, 243). Moreover the colonial governments became increasingly concerned towards the end of the century with the falling birthrate that threatened the future of British settlement and the construction of a White Australia. Women were assigned, in natalist discourse and ultimately through legislation that banned abortion and advertisements for birth control, a distinctive role as child-bearers for the new nation (Falconer 2003, 150–151).

This was the context in which the Australian press summoned the spectre of Louise Michel to illustrate the ‘dangers’ of women’s aspirations to play a greater role in public and political life, with over 1500 articles that referenced her published in the decade from late 1880 to 1890. It can readily be seen from the description of her as a ‘dangerous virago’ that discussion of Michel’s ideas and activism was inextricably tied up with assumptions about her personal life, morals and sexual conduct that stemmed from prejudices about political women of the time. An excellent article by Marie Mullaney (1990) traces the widespread belief that the adoption of radical political ideas must go hand in hand with loose morals on the part of the women concerned. It was not only the tribunal judging the Commune women who assumed that ‘all or almost all live indecently’ (quoted in Mullaney 1990, 304). One of the translations used in the Australian press for ‘*vierge rouge*’ was ‘scarlet virgin’, an adjective that carries a specific connotation in English,<sup>31</sup> and Michel’s critics made other more or less coded references to this implication of immoral living: *The Sydney Morning Herald*’s New Caledonia correspondent, expressing astonishment at the welcome Michel had received in Paris, referred to her as ‘mad and bad’ and ‘badly-inclined’.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> ‘The Biographer, Louise Michel, the French Anarchist’, *Leader* (Melbourne), 13 June 1885, p. 37.

<sup>32</sup> *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 March 1881, p. 7.

Michel's sympathisers, understanding well the code, leapt to her defence, notably 'The Vagabond', the journalist Julian Thomas, whose letter to the *Herald* was published the following day: she may well be mad, he wrote, but her 'private life is above reproach'.<sup>33</sup> It is perhaps with the same aim that her defenders emphasised the simplicity of her dress and her lack of adornment of any kind, as proof that she was not a fallen woman.

Her detractors, while rarely accusing her openly of promiscuity, portrayed her as an 'unnatural' woman, as betraying her feminine nature, but even her supporters found it hard to account for Michel's behaviour, except as a woman whose character transgressed normal, conventional female bounds. Hence the frequent assumption that there existed 'a strain of madness in her blood',<sup>34</sup> made even by those who were sympathetic to her, such as Julian Thomas, which suggested that, whereas being 'mad' was not a disqualification for a certain admiration, being sexually promiscuous would be. To describe her as 'mad', however, opened the way, even to her sympathisers, to discount her social and political ideas, leaving only admiration for the self-sacrifice and devotion she displayed to those suffering around her. She was a 'saint who has lost her way'.<sup>35</sup> Many noted her generosity, her gifts of her own meagre resources and clothing to those more in need than her, but such extreme devotion to the suffering of others could itself be portrayed as abnormal: 'Louise Michel is as mad as a March hare in her sympathy for the sick and famished'.<sup>36</sup> It was only a short step from describing her as 'mad' to describing her as 'hysterical', or a 'hysterical fanatic', a step certain papers did not hesitate to take.<sup>37</sup> Another way of discounting her agency was to suggest that she was under the sway of others, of men of course, notably Victor Hugo: even the mildly

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<sup>33</sup> 'Letter to the Editor', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 March 1881, p. 6.

<sup>34</sup> *The Argus*, 26 June 1883, p. 5.

<sup>35</sup> Reprinted in the *Telegraph* (Brisbane), 21 February 1881, p. 3, from the *Pall Mall Gazette*, 31 December 1880.

<sup>36</sup> *The Naracoorte Herald* (SA), 5 March 1886, p. 3.

<sup>37</sup> The Ladies supplement of the *Express and Telegraph* (Adelaide) deprecated the heavy sentence passed on Michel in 1883, fearing that this might push this 'insurrectionist', whose actions 'are directed by hysterical and mistaken enthusiasm' and whose mind 'is poised on the borderlines between reason and insanity', over the edge into madness. 5 September 1883, p. 2.

sympathetic *Leader* claimed her to be ‘always a victim of Hugo’s rhetoric in the *Châtiments*’, the angry and passionate denunciation of Napoleon III and the Second Empire that the poet had written from his exile in Jersey.<sup>38</sup> Michel and Hugo maintained a long correspondence, from 1850 to his death in 1885, and her early views and writings were strongly influenced by the man she called ‘Maître’. Already in the period leading up to the Commune, however, Michel’s political ideas had begun to diverge from those of Hugo and her turn to anarchism distanced her still further from his republicanism.

Her critics cited Michel as an example of the ‘denaturing’ that would afflict women who were given the vote or allowed to sit in parliament: she was described in the Melbourne *Punch* as the ‘he-woman communist’,<sup>39</sup> Michel and the socialist candidates standing for election in Paris as ‘he-critters’.<sup>40</sup> Some of the fiercest criticism could be found in the (relatively new) sections of the newspapers aimed at women: the ‘Woman’s World’ column in the weekly *Sydney Mail* opined in 1882:

it is a melancholy fact that wherever women take up politics they seem to forget all the nobler instincts of feminine nature. [...] Little of the proverbial gentleness, the long-suffering, the kindly ministrations and the ready helpful sympathy which distinguish all good women in times of trouble, is found in the words or deeds of this recreant band [...]. In Russia women are the ready tools of the Nihilists and in France still foremost in the ranks of the Commune is Louise Michel.<sup>41</sup>

The *Brisbane Courier* cited Michel as an example of the ills that would befall the colonies if women were given the vote, and asked rhetorically: ‘Is poor Louise Michel the kind of person to be adopted as a responsible and rational Egeria?’<sup>42</sup> The irony of such attacks on Michel, in the context of the debate over women’s suffrage, is that she did not campaign for votes for women, since she did not support the election of a government at all;

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<sup>38</sup> ‘The Biographer, Louise Michel, the French Anarchist’, *Leader* (Melbourne), 13 June 1885, p. 37.

<sup>39</sup> 28 June 1883, p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> ‘Our Paris Letter’, *The Naracoorte Herald*, 2 October 1885, p. 3.

<sup>41</sup> ‘Woman’s World’, *The Sydney Mail and NSW Advertiser*, 14 January 1882, p. 58. It cannot be known for certain whether this anonymous article was written by a woman.

<sup>42</sup> ‘Against Woman Suffrage’, *Brisbane Courier*, 13 February 1889, p. 7.

she demanded that her name, which had been added without her knowledge, be withdrawn from the list of female socialist candidates cited above.<sup>43</sup>

There was, however, one aspect of the women's rights debate that caused the press to suspend judgment on Michel: her defence of women's rights at times enabled the press to draw unfavourable comparisons between France and Britain, to the detriment of France. In a not unsympathetic report of a speech on female education and women's rights given by Michel in 1883, the *Evening News*, which was increasingly acquiring a popular readership (Walker 1976, 83), declared that women in England had already acquired rights denied them in France and supported her account of the terrible plight of women workers in Lyon.<sup>44</sup> On another occasion, the journalist in a worker-aligned paper argued that if Michel was mad, it was because she had been 'crazed by [the] oppression' that she had suffered in France.<sup>45</sup> The *Age* concluded in 1890 that the 'ravings of Louise Michel' were to be understood as the outcry of a suffering population, whose needs were being denied in France's rush to arm for war.<sup>46</sup> It must be remembered that, throughout the period dealt with in this article, the francophilia so well described by Alexis Bergantz (2016) was accompanied by a francophobia preoccupied with imperial rivalry and suspicion of France's ambitions in the South Pacific (Rechniewski 2015). The papers did not hesitate, if it was opportune, to use Michel's case to criticise the 'illiberal' political regime in France or that nation's bellicose intentions.

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<sup>43</sup> In a letter of protest to the women who had added her name to the list of female candidates, Michel wrote: 'Je crois que quelques femmes à la Chambre n'empêcheraient pas le prix dérisoire du travail des femmes, et que la prison et le trottoir n'en continueraient pas moins de vomir l'un sur l'autre des légions d'infortunées.' ('I believe that having a few women in the House would not put a stop to the ridiculously low price paid for women's work, and that legions of women in misery would continue regardless to be regurgitated from the prison to the footpath and vice-versa.') Originally published in *La Bataille*, 24 August 1885. Reprinted in Michel 1999, 454.

<sup>44</sup> 'Louise Michel on Women's Rights', *Evening News* (Sydney), 22 February 1883, p. 3.

<sup>45</sup> 'Louise Michel', *Newcastle Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 11 July 1885, p. 12.

<sup>46</sup> *The Age* (Melbourne), 14 July 1890, p. 4. No title.

## A ‘poor old girl’

Fewer but still a considerable number of press articles about her—more than 500—appeared in the Australian press in the final fifteen years of her life. In 1890 she moved to London in order to escape the risk of forced detention in an asylum, becoming that ‘now familiar figure in French politics: the banished or exiled intellectual and militant’ (Bantman 2017, 995). Since women were given the vote in New Zealand in 1893, in South Australia in 1894, and Australian women were enfranchised on Federation in 1902, the campaigns against women’s suffrage had died down and the utility of brandishing the example of Michel as an awful warning of the consequences of female suffrage had lessened. Moreover the newspaper readership now included more women, as did the ranks of proprietors and journalists.<sup>47</sup> Michel was now in her sixties. Her anarchist ideals might still cause concern but rather than portraying her as a threat, the papers now often sought to pity or patronise this elderly, eccentric woman, as a way, it could be argued, of further discounting her political significance. Some claimed that her lectures were poorly attended and her oratory mocked by the public. She cut, according to several commentators, a pathetic even tragic figure, trudging from lecture hall to lecture hall through the streets of London or Paris: ‘This poor, half-crazed, wholly pitiful woman is tragedy incarnate’, wrote the *Kalgoorlie Argus*, concluding that, despite her inflammatory rhetoric, she could not find it in herself to hurt a fly.<sup>48</sup> These accounts ignore or deny the extensive political and pedagogical activities that Michel still pursued during her exile (Bantman 2017).

The premature news in late 1904 that she was dying of consumption led to a further softening of the descriptions of her. She was even described as a ‘wonderful old woman’,<sup>49</sup> as someone who had remained ‘staunch to her principles and true to her friends. That is surely something to be proud of’.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> The Married Women’s Property Act of 1893 made it possible for women to own newspapers: from 1894 to 1899 sixteen newspapers with female proprietors were registered. From the 1880s, the number of women journalists also rose, bringing in many cases a more sympathetic perspective to women’s rights and interests (Walker 1976, 241, 244–245).

<sup>48</sup> ‘Anarchists in London’, *Kalgoorlie Western Argus* (WA), 4 October 1900, p. 26.

<sup>49</sup> ‘London Table Talk’, *The Advertiser* (Adelaide), 23 May 1904, p. 6.

<sup>50</sup> ‘A Famous Frenchwoman’, *Sunday Times* (Sydney), 23 October 1904, p. 3.

When she died in January 1905, many obituaries and accounts of the huge crowds that attended her funeral were published over the following two months. Some of the obituaries were lengthy recapitulations of her life; *The Colac Herald* included a long article from the *Daily News* written by Michel herself in which she powerfully evoked the sensations she experienced as she lay seriously ill, perhaps dying.<sup>51</sup> This was reprinted in several papers in late February and early March. However, the fact that she had been less in the public's eye and less present in the press in the years preceding her death perhaps explains why the papers got so much wrong about her. Several announced the 'death of a Russian anarchist'.<sup>52</sup> Others accumulated mistakes about the details of her life, such as in this extract from her obituary in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, that contains three errors:

Taken prisoner, she was deported to New Caledonia, where she spent the next nine years of her life. Released in 1880 with other revolutionaries, including Henri Rochefort, she came to Sydney, where she remained for some months, staying in an old restaurant in Pitt Street, since demolished.<sup>53</sup>

The worst error was no doubt that made by the *Evening Star* in Western Australia, which, despite describing her as 'the well-known socialist leader', wrote the whole obituary as if she were a man.<sup>54</sup> This error was repeated in several papers.

For months, even years, after her death, Michel continued to be invoked to cast light on current events, personalities or political ideologies. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, discussing what kind of socialism was to be imported into Australia by Mr Watson's party, noted that, with the death of Louise Michel, the last of the previous generation of socialists, wedded to violence and outrage, had passed away. The *Herald* was not, however,

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<sup>51</sup> 'When near death', *The Colac Herald* (Victoria), 24 February 1905, p. 6.

<sup>52</sup> *Goulburn Herald*, 11 January 1905, p. 2, and several other papers.

<sup>53</sup> 'Obituary. Louise Michel', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 January 1905, p. 5.

<sup>54</sup> 'Obituary. Louise Michel', *The Evening Star* (Boulder, WA), 11 January 1905, p. 4. The paper shows itself to be equally weak at maths, since the final sentence reads: 'Louise Michel was born in 1830 and was therefore 65 years of age at the time of his death'.



enthusiastic about the new style of socialism either, in so far as Watson's platform remained wedded to the nationalisation of production.<sup>55</sup> The *Socialist* (Melbourne), on the other hand, invoked the name of Louise Michel as one of the 'women pioneers of socialism'.<sup>56</sup> Women activists might be described as the 'American Louise Michel' (referring to Emma Goldman and Voltairine de Cleyre) or the 'Esthonian [sic] Louise Michel' (referring to Frau Linda, a figure in the Russian Revolution of 1905). As late as 1930, Michel's malign influence continued to perturb the authorities, since her account of the Commune (1898) was banned from entry into Australia along with other major works in the communist canon.<sup>57</sup> This is somewhat ironic, since towards the end of her life, after spending years in London to avoid the attentions of the French authorities, Michel had come to appreciate the British tradition of free speech and political asylum which, to some extent, protected dissidents such as herself (Bantman 2017, 1006). Here, she asserted one day, referring to the speakers at Hyde Park Corner, it is even possible to criticise the Queen. Australia, however, did not quite live up to its metropolitan model, since the banning of books—both fiction and non-fiction—became an obsession of the governors of society's politics and morals from the 1920s to the 1960s.

## Conclusion

If, as her editor concluded, for many people Louise Michel was simply 'une sorte d'épouvantail, une impitoyable virago, une ogresse, un monstre à figure humaine, disposée à semer partout le fer, le feu, le pétrole et la dynamite' (Préface de F. Roy, Michel 1886),<sup>58</sup> the complexity of her character and activism lent her figure an ambiguity that fuelled the interest of the Australian press and public at a time when the struggle for women's rights was the subject of intense and divisive debate. She defied the prejudices and the conventions that governed the expectations of female behaviour

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<sup>55</sup> 'An Apostle of Socialism', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 May 1905, p. 10.

<sup>56</sup> 'Women Pioneers of Socialism', *The Socialist*, 20 April 1907, p. 7.

<sup>57</sup> 'The Booklover', *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* (Renmark, SA), 10 January 1930, p. 7.

<sup>58</sup> 'a kind of scarecrow, a pitiless virago, a female ogre, a monster with a human face, ready to cultivate far and wide the use of the sword, fire, fuel and dynamite'.

and yet could not be easily classed amongst the fallen women of loose morals. She was an ideological combatant committed to the realisation of her political goals through violence but who nevertheless exhibited the generosity and self-sacrificing devotion to the suffering of others that were considered to be amongst the cardinal ‘female virtues’. She sought to overthrow her country’s government, but that country was one with which the British empire had been frequently at war: the *Entente cordiale* was signed less than a year before her death.

In the context of long-standing imperial and European Franco-British rivalry, Michel’s fate at the hands of the French authorities—her deportation and periods of imprisonment—allowed the Australian press to partially discount the radicalism of her ideas in order to assert the superiority of the British system of government and, in this instance, its response to political dissidence, over that of the French. Michel had once hatched a plan to escape from New Caledonia in order to raise a rescue mission in Sydney: by recounting the ‘hauts faits’ of Ribourt and Aleyron: ‘j’espérais qu’un brick, monté par de hardis marins, reviendrait avec moi chercher les autres’ (Michel 1886, 313).<sup>59</sup> The plan failed. It is perhaps as well for the high regard in which she held the Anglo-Saxon tradition of defending political liberty that Australia’s commitment to saving these victims of political repression was never put to the test.

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<sup>59</sup> ‘great deeds’ ‘I hoped that a brig, manned by bold mariners, would come back with me to collect the others’.

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