

Translations of Early French Historical Works on Australia

The studies of early Australia written by nineteenth century French authors contain useful insights into the nation's beginnings from an outside perspective. They are not as widely known as perhaps they should be, the language barrier apparently being the main reason.

In September 2020, the State Library of New South Wales finished accessioning five translations by Geoffrey de Q. Walker of French historical works which are now freely available to the public online under the Creative Commons system. Making these works readily accessible to students, researchers, and the general public may help to introduce new insights into the understanding of Australia's penal history. Following is a brief description of each of the translated books.

Ernest de Blosseville, *History of England's penal colonies in Australia (Histoire des colonies pénales de l'Angleterre dans l'Australie)*, translated by Geoffrey de Q. Walker, Sydney, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, 2018, 395 pp.

<http://archival.sl.nsw.gov.au/Details/archive/110650988>

'Australia's first historian'

Professor Colin Forster in his valuable book *France and Botany Bay* Melbourne University Press (1992), notes that while Blosseville's 1831 work *Histoire des colonies pénales de l'Angleterre dans l'Australie* is regarded as the first scholarly history of Australia ever written, it has never received the recognition it deserves in the Anglosphere. In France, however, it was awarded the 1832 Montyon prize by the *Académie française*. Forster attributes its neglect in the English-speaking world to language problems and the lack of a translation.

The work of Viscount (later Marquis) Bénigne-Ernest Poret de Blosseville (1799–1886), author, scholar and member of parliament, this book was first published in Paris in 1831. It opens with a description of the factors leading to the search for a new location for a penal settlement, following the loss of the American colonies. The author points out that Britain's continued sending of convicted felons to America was a factor in generating the pressures leading to the American Revolution, as illustrated by Benjamin Franklin's famous barb, 'Would you like us to send you back some rattlesnakes?'

Blosseville then sets out a comprehensive political, economic and social account of the development of New South Wales and Tasmania up to 1830. The treatise criticises some aspects of the colony's record, including the heavy reliance on capital punishment, the convicts' sometimes violent treatment of the aboriginal population and the United Kingdom government's neglect of the nascent settlement, which led to near disaster by starvation on three occasions. In general, however, he saw the enterprise as a success, both from the viewpoint of criminal reform, reduction of serious crime and efficient colonisation.

While a comprehensive general history, the work also contributed to a long-running penological debate about transportation, as against the penitentiary system, that developed during the 19th century in France, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Of Penal Colonies (Des Colonies pénales)*, translated by Geoffrey de Q. Walker, Sydney, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, 2017, 46 pp.
<http://archival.sl.nsw.gov.au/Details/archive/110650990>

‘Tocqueville’s doubts’

Forster (1992) also notes that in 1833 Alexis de Tocqueville, author of the classic *Democracy in America*, published *Des colonies pénales*, which was intended as a reply to Blosseville’s generally favourable description of Australian penal settlement and its results. It is forty pages long and consists of three chapters from the above-named book. Tocqueville’s book received the Montyon prize in 1833, the year after the Blosseville book. The only translation of Tocqueville’s work previously in existence was a contemporary one by a German scholar who candidly admitted his lack of English language skills. Possibly not many Australians are aware that Tocqueville wrote anything about Australia.

Des Colonies pénales was in many respects intended as a response to Blosseville’s positive assessment of the convict system. While conceding that the New South Wales and Tasmanian settlements showed that the penal colony system had definite advantages, Tocqueville criticised several features of it, including that it enabled convicts, who commonly developed little attachment to the land of their exile, to return to the home country without necessarily having been reformed; it made it possible for convicts to escape into the wilderness and join with the ‘Indians’ in forming marauding bands, as had happened in Van Diemen’s Land; the convicts were not committed to the success of the settlement and that, combined with neglect by the British government, led several times to starvation almost destroying it; it was difficult to maintain order and the governors had to foil endlessly renewed plots.

Further, as the colony had become more established, transportation lost its deterrent power and some offenders committed crimes in the United Kingdom with the aim of securing a free passage to Australia. Tocqueville saw transportation more as a system of colonization than as a penal system and thought the continued influx of criminals after the colony became established could encourage moves towards independence, as had occurred in America.

Like Jeremy Bentham, de Tocqueville strongly preferred the American penitentiary system to the Australian penal colony approach. Professor John Braithwaite of ANU in 2001 pointed out the perverse results of that preference: ‘These US ideas were a failure in their own terms, though they were interpreted by Americans and Europeans as a success. The Australian ideas were a success in their own terms, though Australians, who believed them to be a success at the time, came to follow the English analysis (of Bentham) that they were a failure. De Tocqueville was the other European who was influential in defining the American penitentiary as a success and transportation of convicts to Australia as a failure. Great distortion arose from both the shame Australia acquired about its past and the pride of Americans in theirs’.

Making these two works readily accessible to more students and researchers may help to introduce new and independent insights into the understanding of Australia’s most formative decades and the development of modern penology.

Jules de la Pilorgerie, *History of Botany Bay: Present state of England’s penal colonies in Australia, or, An examination of the effects of transportation by M. Jules de la Pilorgerie (Histoire de Botany-Bay : état present des colonies pénales de l’Angleterre dans l’Australie, ou, Examen des effets de la déportation, considérée comme peine et comme moyen de colonisation par Jules de La Pilorgerie)*, translated by Geoffrey de Q. Walker, Sydney, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, 2018, 295 pp.
<http://archival.sl.nsw.gov.au/Details/archive/110650989>

‘A rival view from Pilorgerie’

Published in Paris in 1836, Jules de la Pilorgerie's *Histoire de Botany-Bay* is the second French history of Australia. Professor Forster (1992) notes that it is a substantial work (running to 394 pages in all) and is in some respects a general history, but in essence is narrower than that, using Australian history in support of his advocacy for the penitentiary system as against convict transportation. Pilorgerie criticises Blosseville's account, while acknowledging that, 'written with real talent [it] is a vigorous plea in favour of the punishment of deportation and of penal colonies'. He also disparages the favourable view of Sydney as a penal settlement expressed by François Péron, the most famous and influential of the early French observers. Pilorgerie reaches two final conclusions on the penal effectiveness of transportation:

Very far from offering possibilities of reforming the guilty, deportation entails the reciprocal corruption of morals.

Very far from intimidating [detering] the malefactors of the metropolis, it quickly transforms itself, following the degree of prosperity of the penal colonies into a medium of enticement, of inducement to crime.

His side of the argument did not prevail, however, as France went on to establish penal colonies in New Caledonia and at Cayenne, French Guiana (which included Devil's Island). New Caledonia received French convicts until 1897 and Cayenne until 1938. Pilorgerie's work was widely acknowledged in the penal debate as being one of the two authoritative studies, Blosseville's being the other, of Australia's historical experience as a penal colony. Until now, it has remained untranslated.

Thomas Muir, *The Scottish Martyrs and Botany Bay History of the tyranny exerted by the English government against the celebrated Thomas Muir, Scotsman (Histoire de la tyrannie du gouvernement anglais exercée envers le célèbre Thomas Muir, Écossais)*, translated by Geoffrey de Q. Walker, Sydney, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, 2018, 32 pp.
<http://archival.sl.nsw.gov.au/Details/archive/110650992>

'The adventures of Thomas Muir and the Scottish Martyrs'

Chapter IV of Pilorgerie's work includes a reference to the remarkable history of Thomas Muir and the Scottish Martyrs. Following a grossly biased trial in Edinburgh conducted by Lord Braxfield, they were convicted of sedition for advocating a number of parliamentary reforms (most of which were adopted a few decades later) and sentenced to transportation.

Such was Muir's renown as a martyr for liberty and democracy that the French revolutionary Committee of Public Safety ordered the French admiralty to dispatch frigates in an attempt to rescue him, but they were unable to locate the British ship transporting him and his confederates. (As the Committee was itself anything but liberal or democratic, its action was presumably intended as a propaganda gesture.)

Arriving in Sydney in October 1795 aboard the *Surprize*, they were treated favourably by Lieutenant-Governor Grose and Governor Hunter. Two years later, however, Muir escaped aboard an American ship, the *Otter*, and made his way to the west coast of North America, then to Mexico, where he was at first imprisoned by the Spanish authorities and sent to Havana.

Muir then signed on as a seaman aboard a Spanish warship bound for Spain, but was badly wounded, losing his left eye and cheekbone, in a battle with a British frigate. Having been taken ashore, he travelled to France, where he was received at the urging of the French foreign minister, Prince Talleyrand. He was warmly welcomed at Bordeaux, and his account of his experiences was recorded by a local businessman, one Citizen Mazois, and published in 1798 under the title *Histoire de la tyrannie du gouvernement anglais exercée envers le célèbre Thomas Muir, Écossais*

He then proceeded to Paris, where he incidentally befriended Thomas Paine. He was fêted by the *Directoire* revolutionary government and assisted them with their plans to invade Scotland and establish a republic there, with Muir as intended president. He did not long survive, however, succumbing to his injuries a couple of years later.

An intriguing detail in Pilorgerie's version and some other accounts is his claim that a number of New York and Philadelphia residents, moved by the published accounts of Muir's stand and sentence, joined together to raise the funds necessary to charter the *Otter* to deviate from its intended course and call at Port Jackson under some pretext, with the secret, and in the event successful, mission of liberating him. While some circumstantial evidence supports that account, nothing in Muir's letters provides any evidence of prior planning by his friends.

Apparently Muir and the Scottish Martyrs enjoyed some renown in New South Wales for years afterwards, but their story was later virtually forgotten in Australia (although not in Britain, where prominent memorials to him were erected in London and Edinburgh). Perhaps the local colonial authorities were reluctant to celebrate a man whom they must have regarded as a traitor and escaped convict.

When Geoffrey de Q. Walker translated this publication, he was not aware that it had already been translated: Wantrup, Jonathan, 1990, *The transportation, exile and escape of Thomas Muir: a Scottish radical's account of Governor Hunter's New South Wales published at Paris in 1798*, translated from the French with introduction and notes, Melbourne, Boroondara Press. Several copies of this publication are still for sale as rare books and it is held in a number of libraries. This translation is not available online.

Paul Merruau, *The Convicts in Australia (1851–1852) (Les convicts en Australie (1851–1852))*, translated by Geoffrey de Q. Walker, Sydney, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, 2017, 170 pp.

<http://archival.sl.nsw.gov.au/Details/archive/110650991>

‘A novelist’s view of convict life’

Paul Merruau's work *Les convicts en Australie (1851–1852)*, published in 1853, has not previously been translated. The author presents his work as fiction, but seeks to base it on fact and supplies a bibliography of the non-fiction works he has consulted. The French original was reprinted in 2016 by ULAN Press of Middletown, Delaware.

A 1986 review of *Les convicts en Australie (1851–1852)* for the ISFAR journal by J. H. Pollet de Saint-Ferjeux asserts that despite the book's shortcomings, 'Merruau's talent as a journalist, his ability to evoke an atmosphere and the quality of his mind make this book worth reading'. He concludes:

I claim that this book deserves survival in the context of Australian culture for at least three reasons: firstly, it does attempt to analyze the convict mentality rather than merely retelling the story of the convict state. Secondly, it attempts to analyze the mechanics of punishment rather than the philosophies/prejudices of the time about punishment. Thirdly, Merruau is very good at recreating the atmosphere of a far-away land that he hasn't seen (*Explorations* n° 3 1986).

Until the 2016 reprint appeared, it was thought that there were no more than half a dozen copies of the French original still in existence. It is therefore likely that few Australian scholars have had access to it. The addition of an English translation may help to bring it to the notice of a wider scholarly audience.

A Note from the Author: *All five translations are available in full text on the website of the State Library of New South Wales and may be reproduced, subject only to acknowledgement of source, for any non-commercial purpose. They can be accessed via a catalogue search under the author's name or mine.*

Geoffrey de Q. Walker translations of French publications on the history of the New South Wales penal colony, 1798–1853, (compiled 2015–2018)

http://archival.sl.nsw.gov.au/Details/archive/110637728?_ga=2.142008757.644637245.1599558422-495808619.1528758056