

Australian Connections with the Franco-Prussian War 1870 and the Commune of Paris 1871

Patricia Clarke

When Prussian forces besieged Paris in 1870 and a revolutionary Commune ruled the city the following year, two women journalists with long associations with the Australian press were on the spot to report these momentous events. Anna Blackwell's dispatch as she fled Paris in August 1870 was the most dramatic of the many hundreds that she sent during just over thirty years representing the *Sydney Morning Herald* in France. The following year Frances Cashel Hoey wrote an eye-witness account of life in Paris during the rule of the short-lived Marxist Commune of Paris that made the city the centre of world interest. Hoey's account was published in the London periodical the *Spectator* under the heading 'A Catholic Lady in "Red" Paris'¹ and republished in the American *Littell's Literary Age*.² As soon as copies of the *Spectator* arrived in Australia it was republished in the Melbourne *Argus*,³ *Sydney Morning Herald*,⁴ the Hobart *Mercury*,⁵ even the *Wallaroo Times and Mining Journal*,⁶ and an

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¹ 'A Catholic Lady in "Red" Paris', *Spectator*, April 15, 1871, 444–446.

² *Littell's Living Age*, vol. cxi, 1871, 431–436.

³ *Argus*, June 16, 1871, 7.

⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 23, 1871, 6.

⁵ *Mercury*, June 27, 1871, 3.

⁶ *Wallaroo Times and Mining Journal*, July 2, 1871, 4.

edited and paraphrased version appeared earlier in the *Adelaide Express and Telegraph*.⁷ Hoey also wrote an account of her visit published in a short-lived publication begun by Anthony Trollope, *Saint Pauls [sic] Magazine*, which was not republished in Australia.⁸

The republication of Hoey's *Spectator* article in Australia and its popularity in Britain and the United States led to her appointment in 1873 as a London correspondent for the Melbourne weekly, *The Australasian*. Like Blackwell, she held her position for over thirty years. Both Anna Blackwell and Frances Cashel Hoey were great reporters who saw immediately that they were witnessing events that would live in history. Yet, like most pioneer women journalists, they earned only a meagre living in hard-won jobs.

Anna Blackwell: Paris correspondent for the *Sydney Morning Herald*

Anna Blackwell was engaged as Paris correspondent in 1860 following a new move by the proprietor and editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, John Fairfax, to make 'its columns the receptacle for cosmopolitan news gathered by its own correspondents'.⁹ Surprisingly for a man well-known for his conservative views, he chose a woman to represent the paper in Paris, the only woman among the correspondents he appointed in England, the United States, and Europe. Blackwell's appointment came at a time when only a handful of women in Australia had any journalistic association with newspapers,¹⁰ and when the job of foreign correspondent was to remain almost entirely a male preserve for the following century. She came to be held in high regard by the Fairfax family ensuring her hold on the position continued until she retired in the early 1890s.

The Franco-Prussian War in which Blackwell was personally involved was by far the greatest overseas news story in the Australian press in 1870. It generated reams of newsprint devoted to reports and analysis in city and country newspapers which also published supplements with specially produced maps designed to help readers follow troop movements.

⁷ *Adelaide Express and Telegraph*, June 5, 1871, 3.

⁸ ‘“Red” Paris on Easter Sunday’, *Saint Pauls Magazine*, May 15, 1871, 143–167.

⁹ ‘Sixty years of newspaper history’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 19, 1897, 10.

¹⁰ Patricia Clarke, ‘Women in the Media’, *Companion to the Australian Media*, ed. Bridget Griffen-Foley (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2014), 492.

The arrival of each new report generated such excitement outside the doors of leading city newspapers that its reception itself became a major news story. Peter Putnis, in his analysis of the transmission of news from the Franco-Prussian War to Australia, attributes the great interest to several factors. The major ones were the fact that the Australian colonies would be involved should Britain decide to enter the war on either side; the threat posed by the war to global trade on which Australia's prosperity depended; and the large proportion of recent settlers in the Australian population following the massive immigration during the gold-rush era.¹¹

Escape from Paris

Blackwell was fifty-four when she joined the exodus and escaped from France to England as triumphant Prussian forces approached Paris. She began her dispatch on August 18, 1870, under the usual heading of 'Continental News. From our Paris correspondent', describing the general air of complacency in official quarters where an easy victory was expected. Ostensibly, the war began over Prussia's push to have an ally appointed to the throne of Spain over French opposition. This goaded the French Emperor into declaring war expecting that a quick victory would shore up his sagging popularity. It was welcomed by Bismarck who grasped the opportunity to build support from other German states. Blackwell, in an earlier dispatch covering the period, from July 27 to August 12, 1870, described the apprehension of ordinary French citizens that belied the official euphoria and optimism:

But though the majority of those who are in no danger of having to front the rifled cannon, or the needle guns in their own person, is noisily testifying to its satisfaction at the coming chastisement of "Prussian insolence," there is a strong deep current of an opposite tendency, that will make itself felt in time. The sweeping up of the young, able-bodied males, is going on at such a rate that one involuntarily wonders if ordinary life here will not come to a standstill.

¹¹ Peter Putnis, 'Overseas news in the Australian press in 1870 and the colonial experience of the Franco-Prussian War', *History Australia* 4, no. 1, 0.61, 0.67, 0.613–0.614. (The author wishes to thank Peter Putnis for providing access to these papers.)

Your butcher has gone; your milkman is going; your grocer has lost one or two of his shopmen, and he fears lest he too, may not be made to follow them to the front; your greengrocer's son went last week, his nephew goes tonight; and your bread was brought to you by a poor woman, whose tears flow fast as she explains that her husband has been "called for" and that she is forced to take his place at the baker's to get bread for her children.¹²

In later parts of this very long dispatch, Blackwell recorded that the 'wild excitement of Paris was calming down' while one million men on either side prepared 'to tear one another to pieces' in a war 'desired and determined beforehand' by the French Government and 'the singing of "patriotic songs"' proceeded at the opera. At the end of this dispatch, she reported that while only sketchy accounts of three main battles had reached the capital, 'the utter incapacity of the French forces to cope with the Prussians', was becoming apparent as they dug in at Metz. Meanwhile, the French Government seized English publications as they arrived in France which Blackwell interpreted as 'the French having experienced some new reverse'. She concluded that 'all this loss and misery' was occurring because France 'had chosen to be jealous of a neighbour whom she fancied was growing too big'.¹³

Blackwell's next dispatch, culminating in her departure from Paris, mirrors the change in mood from the expectation of an easy and quick victory to the encirclement of almost the entire French Army, an event so inconceivable that at first it was not believed. There was such lack of reliable news in the capital that Blackwell wrote of the Battle of Metz as a victory for the French when in fact French forces, led by Emperor Napoleon III and his most senior Army chief at the head of a quarter of a million men, were surrounded by the Prussian Army and surrendered. There is no reason to believe that Blackwell's account was any less reliable than others. One historian described the lack of news as 'a plethora of incredible rumours which, since no one could refute them, the Paris Press printed with avidity'.¹⁴

¹² *Sydney Morning Herald*, September 29, 1870, 4.

¹³ *SMH*, September 29, 1870, 4.

¹⁴ Alistair Horne, *The Fall of Paris: The Siege and the Commune 1870–1871* (London: Macmillan, 1965), 88.

As Parisians cascaded from complacency to alarm, Blackwell added the latest developments on August 19 and 25. Then on August 31, 1870 she added a graphic account of her departure from Paris ahead of the invading forces. After she reached Boulogne, she wrote the final part of her story. The result was an account of a war that was so fast moving it was over in seven weeks with Blackwell's personal experience of escape adding immeasurably to the drama of her report. The complete and sudden destruction of French military power had little precedent in European history; a historian wrote that the completeness of the Prussian success in 1870 'astounded the world'.¹⁵

Blackwell began her dispatch with the words on a placard that she read on the city walls warning 'all foreigners and useless mouths' that they would be ejected summarily from the city when the Prussians arrived. This, she continued, 'determined your correspondent to follow the example so generally set by the foreign residents, and to seek residence in the "English colony" [Boulogne]'.¹⁶ Although she did not spell this out, the reason was the difficulty authorities foresaw in feeding Parisians:

As the guns fell silent, the divergent emotions of shame at the capitulation and of satisfaction that it was all over were immediately overshadowed by one thought common to all Parisians. Food! ... Matters soon proved to be worse than even the Government had suspected.¹⁷

As she left the usually gay city of Paris, Blackwell described the 'grave and anxious faces and the vague and dubious bits of intelligence given out by the anxious authorities'. Peasants from surrounding districts had been ordered to send all their grain, hay, and flour to Paris. They piled their families and belongings on top of their wagons and joined the huge numbers of people moving to the centre of the city preparing to withstand the siege. She continued:

The train by which your correspondent quitted the capital was delayed three hours on the road by the enormous crowding of the line, train after train, of interminable length, bringing stores of grain, flour, provisions,

¹⁵ Michael Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Invasion of France 1870–1871* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1961), 1.

¹⁶ *SMH*, October 31, 1870, 2–3.

¹⁷ Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War*, 247.

cattle, sheep, forage, coal, &c, to the city so soon to be beleaguered by the foe. It really seemed, as the long lines of laden wagons went by, as though all France were being drained for the last scene of the sad drama in progress. All night, before I left Paris, the bleating of sheep and lowing of cattle filled the streets, reserves for living food being created in all the vacant lots within the fortifications. Immediately around the city were huge piles of trunks of trees, hastily cut down to deprive the advancing host of cover; the boughs, thrifitly prepared for the baker's ovens, being neatly packed in goods-wagons for transportation to the capital. In places the air was filled with the smell of sap.

At every station, even the smallest, was a group of people eagerly waiting for news, and a squad of country bumpkins being drafted off to war. It was heartrending to see all the young faces, all the figures, generally small, going off thus to form "flesh for cannon," according to the saying of the first of the now extinct "Napoleons", for whatever else may be the results of this war, the downfall of Empire is sure to be one of them.¹⁸

The day Blackwell's column was published in the *Herald*, two months after it was posted by ship mail, the paper recorded that crowds surged around the doors after news spread that a ship, the *City of Melbourne*, had arrived carrying the latest overseas news which had been sent part of the way by cable. The excitement to learn the news was described as 'intense' and as soon as the signal of the ship's arrival went up, a large crowd assembled in front of the *Herald* office. To add to the excitement, the Royal Mail Steam Ship *Avoca* docked at Adelaide about the same time with even later news which could be telegraphed to Sydney. A second and third edition of the *Herald* had to be published that day before the demand for war news was satisfied.

In 1870 the transmission of news to Australia was in transition. Cable channels were available from Europe to Port Galle in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and across the Atlantic and the United States, in both cases with cabled news continuing by ship mail to Australian ports. A few years later the completion of the Australian overland telegraph line to which submarine cables could link at Darwin would revolutionise many aspects of news gathering and production with major news arriving in two hours. It barely affected,

¹⁸ *SMH*, October 31, 1870, 2.

however, the long, discursive dispatches of the type written by Blackwell and other women correspondents whose contributions continued to be sent by ship mail because of the prohibitive cost of cable communication except for major news. This had ramifications on the perceived value of their dispatches and consequentially their value as correspondents. Anna Blackwell's remuneration provides a pointed illustration of this development.

Although Blackwell's dispatch covered a much earlier stage of the war than the cabled news it was published on pages 2 and 3. As soon as possible after she reached Boulogne, Anna Blackwell sailed for England where several of her sisters lived. She remained in England until the Franco-Prussian war and its aftermath were over. When she returned to Paris, she resumed sending her valued dispatches.

Bringing Europe to Australia

Anna Blackwell's early life in an activist, competitive family prepared her for the challenges of journalism. She was born in Bristol, England, on June 21, 1816, the eldest of nine surviving children of Samuel and Hannah Blackwell. Another daughter, Elizabeth Blackwell, became the world's first qualified woman doctor. In 1832, when Anna was sixteen, the family migrated to the United States, living first in New York later moving to Cincinnati, Ohio, where Samuel Blackwell died in 1838. As the eldest child, Anna who had campaigned for women's rights and supported the anti-slavery movement, joined her mother and sisters in running a school to provide support for the family.¹⁹

In 1845 she joined the Brook Farm utopian community, a short-lived experiment in communal living in Massachusetts, which adopted some of the theories of French utopian socialist and philosopher Charles Fourier whose works she later translated. Soon after, she moved to Paris and by 1860 had been engaged to write for newspapers and periodicals in many countries.

One of Anna's first columns for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, datelined October 24, 1860, Paris, and signed 'Stella', the pseudonym she used for the paper, consisted of six full length columns of closely packed type covering events in many European countries. It included reports on Garibaldi's

¹⁹ Elinor Rice Hays, *Those Extraordinary Blackwells : the Story of a Journey to a Better World* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967).

progress in the liberation of Italy, Queen Victoria's recent visit to Hesse, the abnormally cold European weather, French acceptance of potatoes as a food, the French Emperor's tour of Algiers, Lyons and the south of France, free trader Richard Cobden's negotiations for a treaty with the French Government and several examples of the harsh rule of a Serbian Prince.²⁰ The last item is a good example of her chatty style as she shared confidences from the capitals of Europe with her readers in far-off Australia:

A highly intelligent Frenchman, who has for several years occupied an important public post at Bucharest, and who is intimately acquainted with all the region which Austria would so much like to add to her dominions at the expense of Turkey, has curious particulars of the late Prince Milosch, and the way in which he governed.²¹

Blackwell may have been exaggerating the importance of her source and her knowledge of geopolitics may have been superficial, but it was information that was engaging and could not offend anyone except perhaps an expert in Serbian affairs. Her information about Prince Milosch was that he had buried an archbishop alive.

Early in 1865, when the proprietor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, John Fairfax, was travelling to England, his son James Reading Fairfax wrote telling him he could pick up a copy of the paper from their correspondent 'Miss Blackwell' (Fairfax Archive, 21 January 1865). Later that year, in a further letter, James Reading Fairfax, wrote:

...the gossiping style of Miss Blackwell, I think, is much appreciated & if a person could be obtained at a reasonable salary, articles of a similar character on English affairs would be attractive to our readers.²²

Praise such as this ensured Blackwell remained the paper's correspondent until she chose to retire. In the later 1870s, when she became interested in spiritualist philosophy, her relatives believed she had become eccentric but there is no indication of this in the quality of her columns. One 6,300-word dispatch, published in August 1880, covered an extraordinary range of

²⁰ *SMH*, October 24, 1860.

²¹ *SMH*, October 24, 1860.

²² *Fairfax Archive*, August 29, 1865.

subjects in her usual engaging manner. Over four tightly packed columns, she led readers to glide seamlessly from events in Portugal and Spain to Italy and the Mediterranean, several places in France and finally Paris.²³ Altogether in August 1880, she had three dispatches totalling 15,646 words published. This was not unusual. Written in her lively, slightly detached style, Blackwell's columns obviously had great appeal. It is probably safe to say that not much newsworthy European news and gossip escaped her eagle eyes.

More than twenty years after they first appeared, her columns remained as popular as ever. There had been some talk among the Fairfax executives about changing their emphasis but on June 4, 1881, James Reading Fairfax (later knighted) wrote to Anna reaffirming her role:

[we] think it better that you should continue the monthly budget as formerly and not trouble to write upon politics more than you used to do. So please, consider the arrangements for your continental gossip undisturbed. There appears to be some probability of my being in Europe ... next year when I shall do myself the pleasure of seeing you.²⁴

In her later years, Blackwell became involved in some implausible money-making schemes, including one aimed at digging up treasure supposedly buried by the fleeing James II in the seventeenth century. Her involvement in this project ruined her financially. At the same time, changes in world conditions and more reliance by the press on cable news caused her outlets to drop off, and by 1885, only the *Sydney Morning Herald* remained. Apart from £100 a year from the *Herald*, her only other source of income was £100 a year which her brother Henry provided. In 1890 the *Herald* raised her fee from £100 to £125 a year. This, she recorded, gave her no pleasure as she believed they should have raised her payment twenty-five years earlier. During the 1890s when nearly eighty, she decided to give up writing instead of, as she said, working herself to death to pay for what she described as her 'coming cremation'.²⁵ She moved to Hastings where she lived with an invalid sister, Marian, in the same vicinity as her sister Elizabeth who lived with another sister.

²³ *SMH*, August 24, 1880, 7.

²⁴ Fairfax Archive, June 4, 1881.

²⁵ Hays, *Those Extraordinary Blackwells*, 263.

Anna Blackwell died on 4 January 1900, aged eighty-four, after an attack of influenza and bronchitis. The *Sydney Morning Herald* did not note her death at the time it occurred, but when Dr Elizabeth Blackwell died in 1910, it belatedly wrote about their correspondent:

Anna Blackwell, who adopted the nom de plume “Stella”, was a lady of brilliant attainments, and was almost as distinguished in the world of literature as her sister was in the world of medicine. She was a contributor to the columns of the *Herald* at the time of the Franco-Prussian war and was compelled to leave Paris during the siege. Upon the termination of hostilities, however, she returned to her duties...²⁶

In later developments in Paris a new French Government of national defence assumed power in Paris in September, deposed Napoleon III, abolished the Second Empire and proclaimed the Third Republic. The Prussian siege of the capital began on 19 September 1870 and lasted until an armistice was agreed in January and ratified at the beginning of March 1871. By then the populace was close to starving. The National Assembly elected in February to conclude a peace treaty had a royalist majority, reflecting the conservative view of the majority in the provinces. The republican Parisians fearing that the National Assembly meeting in Versailles would restore the monarchy, rose against the government, and set up the revolutionary Commune of Paris which ruled the capital from March 18 to May 28, 1871.

A Catholic Lady in ‘Red’ Paris

While Anna Blackwell was living in England, Irish-born journalist and writer Frances Cashel Hoey who was based in London, visited Paris during the reign of the Commune. Hoey’s experience and professionalism are clear in her description of how she approached gathering information:

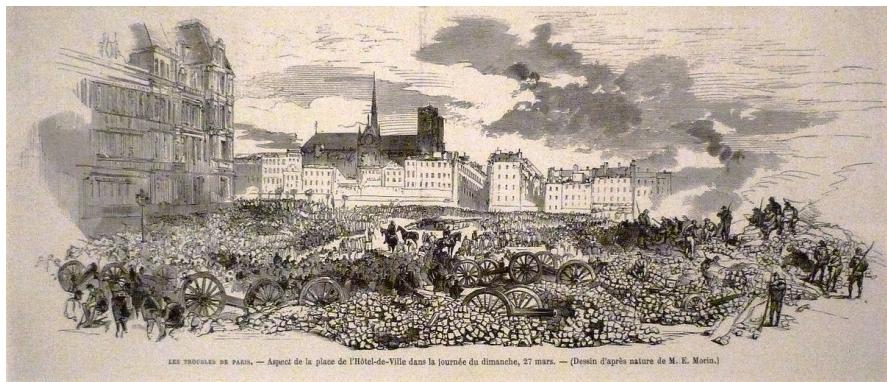
My first object was to arrive at an understanding of the actual situation in the city. This I made out by reading the latest *affiches*, containing the decrees of the Commune, all the newspapers (several had been suppressed during the two preceding days), and questioning everyone who was disposed to give me information. I found no hesitation on the part of anyone, and I talked with a great many people, some well-known

²⁶ SMH, June 14, 1910, 12.

individuals resident in Paris, several members of the National Guard, a few shopkeepers, a *cocher*, to whom I was indebted for the sight of the most remarkable traces of the siege, one priest, several nuns, two *concierges*, a couple of surgeons, and several *citoyennes*.²⁷

Frances Cashel Hoey arrived at the Embarcadère du Nord at 8 am on Easter Sunday, April 9, 1871, three weeks after the start of the Commune, to see for herself what she referred to as the ‘Red Revolution’. It was a courageous journey undertaken alone. Travelling through Amiens, Chantilly, and St Denis, she saw evidence of the humiliating defeat the French Army had suffered the previous year.

At Amiens I saw the first indication of the great change which had come over France, in the Prussian soldiers in occupation of the railway station. Just beyond Chantilly I came upon the first material traces of the war. A heap of ruins—brick and mortar, planks and plaster, shattered glass—all with a smashed, mashed look about them which no mere demolition gives; and, amid the greater ruin, fragments of furniture and toys.... The lines were occupied at all the stations by long trains of waggons [sic] marked “Hanover,” and stamped with a red crown.²⁸



Place de l'Hôtel de Ville, Sunday March 27, 1871, engraving by M. E. Morin

²⁷ Frances Cashel Hoey, “‘Red’ Paris on Easter Sunday’, *Saint Pauls Magazine*, May 15, 1871, 167.

²⁸ Hoey, “‘Red’ Paris on Easter Sunday”, 166.

In the weeks after the Commune took charge, the press in Britain bombarded readers with alarmist headlines of anarchy and terror and these became more extreme in the British and American press as the Commune continued. Initial headlines in England included ‘Violent Acts of the Reds’,²⁹ and ‘Mob Law Triumphant’.³⁰ The *Times* and the *Manchester Guardian* had more subdued headlines but the content of their articles was similar: threats of reprisals which could lead to another Reign of Terror; the threat of imprisonment and summary justice to persons convicted of complicity with the Versailles government; apprehension that ‘all kinds of excesses’ were ahead; the suppression of newspapers and the arrest of the Archbishop of Paris.³¹

Few signs of revolutionary activity

After stepping off the train Hoey engaged a driver, addressing him, following advice she had come armed with, as ‘*citoyen*’, the term she had been told was used by the revolutionaries, but she was disappointed when he addressed her not as *citoyenne* but as Madame. This *cocher* turned out to be one of her greatest assets. He knew the easiest routes, he obtained newspapers and government notices for her to read, he got her close to the Vendôme barricade and volunteered his opinion of the mood of Parisians. Surprises continued as Hoey drove through empty, silent streets with little sign of the revolutionary activity she had expected. All she saw were wagons laden with ammunition guarded by what she described as ‘a disorderly escort of men in motley costumes, with guns and bayonets’.

What had become of the swarming life of Paris? Every shop was shut, many were boarded up, from a few windows hung shabby red flags, but the very buildings looked dead. It bewildered me. I could find no traces of the siege, and all my previous ideas of a revolution were dispersed. Not a bell was ringing, though this was Easter Sunday, but the churches were open. I passed several, and first the Madeleine, into which I went. It had *not* been pillaged, it had *not* been in any way injured. ... Children were sitting on the steps, and women were praying inside the church as usual.

²⁹ *Standard*, 1871, March 31, 1871, 6.

³⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, April 10, 1871, 3.

³¹ ‘The Civil War in France’, *Times*, April 7, 1871, 7; ‘Summary of News’, *Guardian*, April 7, 1871, 2.

Only the legend, “Liberté, fraternité, égalité,” deeply cut into the stone over the great door, denoted change.³²

She discovered a similar scene at Notre Dame des Victoires where she attended Mass. She had been told that the church was in a ‘bad part’ but her driver laughed at the idea, describing Paris ‘as quiet as a bird’s nest’ except for the Neuilly area to the north-west. From the distance she heard ‘the sullen roar’ of cannon reverberating in the church and setting the heavy leather doors flapping. The church was crowded ‘with a solemn, devout crowd’ mainly women all dressed in black who looked ‘grave, anxious, grieved, *but not one frightened, no, not one.*’ While she was at church her enterprising driver collected some flyers and newspapers published by the Commune: *Le Cri du Peuple*, *Le Mot d’Ordre* and *Le Rappel*. As she travelled along Rue St Honoré, Hoey noted that they were in the area that had been the home of the ‘sea-green incorruptible’ (Robespierre), a Jacobin leader of the 1789 French revolution who was guillotined in 1794. The Commune planned to commemorate him with a bronze statue, she wrote, but only ‘when they have time and a few kings have been melted down’.³³ By arrangement, she met a friend who walked towards her ‘leisurely and unconcernedly’ with a bouquet in her hand. The friend assured her that it was safe for women and children to walk on the streets, only men were targeted and dragooned into the National Guard. After observing a regiment marching out ‘with a good deal of shuffle and very little tramp’, Hoey described the soldiers.

These poor creatures are shabby, wretched, silent. I did not hear a laugh, or an oath, I did not see one violent gesture, I hardly saw a smile all day. The roystering, roaring terrible “Reds,” as I saw them, are tired, dull men, doing ill-directed work with plodding indifference.³⁴

At the Place Vendôme, Hoey saw the elaborate barricade built for defence against the Prussians, which was now in the hands of the Commune. She was invited behind the structure where she was surprised by its symmetry

³² Frances Cashel Hoey, ‘A Catholic Lady in “Red” Paris’, *Spectator*, April 15, 1871, 444.

³³ Hoey, ‘A Catholic Lady in “Red” Paris’, 444–445.

³⁴ Hoey, ‘A Catholic Lady in “Red” Paris’, 445.

and the evident strength of the stone walls which were being strengthened further by ‘busy, silent groups’. Travelling by way of the Tuileries Palace and the Pont Royal, she arrived at Faubourg Saint-Germain where she visited an unnamed friend whom she described as a ‘famous lady’. When Hoey asked her opinion of the situation in Paris, she replied: ‘Tell them to fear everything, and to hope very little. We are a degraded people and we deserve what we have got, and are going to get’. This opinion of the French national character as prone to conflict and bankrupt politically and morally was common in views expressed in Britain and the United States.³⁵

Hoey continued her journey ‘past the desolate boulevards and grand, ghastly sad houses which have never been inhabited, the dust of whose construction was hardly laid when their roofs were battered by the Prussian shells’. Her destination was nearly five kilometres further south as far as La Glacière which she described as ‘a bad part at the best of time’. Her reason for venturing to this location was revealed in her *Saint Pauls Magazine* article to visit a convent. She approached the door fearing that the nuns may not have survived, but discovered they had been unscathed in the Prussian bombardment and had survived the hunger of the siege together with their young pupils and their elderly patients.³⁶ Back in the city at Place de la Concorde, she observed that the Strasbourg statue had been draped in black crepe to mourn the capture of Alsace. The adjacent Palais de l’Industrie had been converted to an ambulance station where she saw ambulance carts bringing in the wounded, and inside the hall, she saw rows of narrow beds ready to be occupied. This led her to speculate that accounts of the wounded in recent engagements had been enormously exaggerated.³⁷

Before leaving London, she had read in English papers that shells were falling in the Champs Élysées, and that spectators had been killed. Instead, she found a vast bivouac of the National Guard with nurses and children strolling about and the *bourgeoisie* taking their walks abroad. Warned not to go further, she heard the booming of cannon and a bursting whirr as a

³⁵ Patrick C. Jamieson, ‘Foreign Criticisms of the 1871 Paris Commune: The Role of British and American Newspapers and Periodicals’, *Intersections* 11, no. 1 (2010): 105–107.

³⁶ Hoey, “‘Red’ Paris on Easter Sunday”, 172–173.

³⁷ Hoey, ‘A Catholic Lady in “Red” Paris’, 445.

shell exploded behind the Arc de Triomphe. From the Rue de Lisbonne she smelt gunfire in the air and glimpsed cannon on Mt Valérien, a fort on the way to Versailles held by Government forces. Finally, she observed from a safe distance of about five kilometres the Hôtel de Ville, Notre Dame and the Palais de Justice, which were the centres of revolutionary authority. From her vantage point, the Hôtel de Ville appeared ‘a perfect ant-hill of guns and soldiers’ while Notre Dame was ‘black, silent, and deserted’, a decree having been issued that there were to be no evening services on Easter Sunday.³⁸

After recording many more details of scenes in the streets of Paris, Cashel Hoey had a comfortable, unimpeded journey home to Victoria Station in London on the 7.15 pm mail train. She ended her long article refuting a statement, published in the London *Daily Telegraph*,³⁹ that ladies endeavouring to escape from Paris were forced to pay 100 francs before being allowed to purchase tickets. During her visit of nearly twelve hours, she had travelled close to forty kilometres in a two-seater coupé. She had gathered enough material to write two long articles packed with first-hand information of life under the Commune and had formed her opinion of its operation.

In the second of her articles published in *Saint Pauls Magazine*, she disclosed some hints of the friends she saw in Paris on Easter Sunday and a more obscure source harking back to her first marriage appears to indicate the nature of this business. In a study of his genealogy, George Bernard Shaw stated that his cousin Frances (Fancy) Cashel Hoey had kidnapped her daughters from their paternal grandmother in Dublin and fled with them to Holland following the death of her husband Adam Murray Stewart in 1855.⁴⁰ Her frequent visits to France from that time would appear to be in connection with the education of her daughters in Paris.

Hoey’s *Spectator* article was an eye-witness account, mostly free of interpretation. In her *Saint Pauls Magazine* article, she summed up the opinions she had formed:

³⁸ Hoey, ‘A Catholic Lady in “Red” Paris’, 446.

³⁹ Hoey, ‘A Catholic Lady in “Red” Paris’, 3.

⁴⁰ Dan H. Laurence ed., *Bernard Shaw: Collected Letters 1874–1897* (London: Mark Reinhardt, 1965), 12.

That the city of Paris will get what she is fighting for, and will keep it when she has got it, is a belief which I find tolerably prevalent, even among those who by no means share the *Red Republican* sentiments. That the destinies of Paris should be swayed by the ignorant and unprogressive peasantry they believe to be impossible henceforth as it has become unbearable; and they are confident in the ultimate success of the Commune, because they believe their success will be for the true interests of all, and that *when they have extirpated persons who prevent the recognition of this fact*, the triumph of common sense and fraternity will be complete.

The absence of violence, exaggeration, and menace in the tone of all the talk which I heard, was as remarkable as the external quiet. That anything like the former order of things could be re-established it does not occur to anyone to believe.... “Who are the chief men of the Commune now,” I asked and received answer, “We do not know, but we know we may trust them”—an extraordinary contrast to the feeling all through the war and the siege.⁴¹

Frances Cashel Hoey’s sanguine view of the Commune’s survival proved to be wrong in less than two months. A young officer in the British Royal Engineers who was later Sir Herbert Chermside, Governor of Queensland, experienced the last days of the Commune in an extremely uncomfortable predicament. As a recently graduated young officer, he and some fellow officers visited Versailles. That night Chermside and a friend sneaked into Paris while the French Army was fighting to regain the city. They were arrested as English Royal Engineers officers assisting the Communards and led out to be shot the next morning. But they managed to contact the British Ambassador, Lord Lyon, and eventually got out of Paris in the guise of Queen’s Messengers carrying important letters for the British Government.⁴²

During the last days of the Commune, the Hôtel de Ville and the Tuileries Palace were burnt, the Archbishop of Paris and other hostages were

⁴¹ Hoey, “‘Red’ Paris on Easter Sunday”, 167–168.

⁴² Lt-Colonel Sir Herbert Charles Chermside, ‘Memoir’, *Royal Engineers Journal* 44, (June 1930): 327; C. V. Owen, ‘Chermside, Sir Herbert Charles’(1850–1929)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

executed, and many Communards died at the barricades. Few preparations had been made and the planned second line of barricades did not exist.⁴³ The revenge exacted was massive. The suppression of the Commune resulted in immediate deaths of many thousands of Communards while the trials of others continued at Versailles until 1875. Many were sentenced to death or deportation and more than 4000 people were transported to New Caledonia.⁴⁴

Frances Cashel Hoey's background



Frances Cashel Hoey is on the right in this photo of her with her family.
Photograph included in Shaw Family Album, National Library of Ireland

Born Frances Sarah Johnston on February 14, 1830 in Dublin, she was the eldest child of Charles Bolton Johnston, secretary/registrar of the Protestant Mt Jerome Cemetery at Harold's Cross south of the city, and his wife, formerly Charlotte Jane Shaw. Although one of eight children and largely self-educated, she acquired a good knowledge of literature and her talent

⁴³ Stewart Edwards, *The Paris Commune 1871* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1971), 313.

⁴⁴ Barry McGowan, 'Marcus Clarke and Felix Meyer's cameo roles in the Paris Commune', *La Trobe Journal*, (March 2017): 24–34.

for writing must have been nurtured in the family. She grew up imbued with Irish nationalist sentiments, members of her family having been active in the 1798 uprising against British rule.⁴⁵ In 1846 on her sixteenth birthday, Frances married Adam Murray Stewart and they had two daughters. About 1852 she began supplementing their income by writing on art and reviewing books for the Irish nationalist periodicals, *Freeman's Journal* and *Nation*. At the *Nation* her associates were members of the Young Ireland movement, an organisation associated with the failed rebellion against British rule in 1848. Charles Gavan Duffy, who had been tried for treason and was later elected a member of the British House of Commons, was editor until 1856 when the assistant editor, John Cashel Hoey took over, following Gavan Duffy's resignation from parliament and emigration to Victoria.⁴⁶ John Cashel Hoey resigned the following year and moved to London.

Within days of her husband's death in Dublin on November 6, 1855 Frances Stewart was in Paris.⁴⁷ As revealed by her cousin Bernard Shaw she had kidnapped her daughters and escaped with them in defiance of her dead husband's wishes. After securing a secret location in Paris where her daughters could be educated, she moved to London and began to establish herself as a journalist and writer. She had letters of introduction to William Makepeace Thackeray and to the editor of the *Morning Post*, for which she began writing. She also established a long association as a reviewer for *Chambers's Journal*, so beginning her life as a prolific writer in every field where she could earn money.

On February 6 1858, Frances Stewart and John Cashel Hoey were married in England and she converted to Catholicism. Until their fortunes improved in the early 1870s, the Hoeys were dependent on casual, poorly paid work as contributors to newspapers and periodicals. In 1873 Frances's engagement to write for the *Australasian* began and soon after, John Cashel Hoey was appointed secretary to the Agent-General for Victoria in London, an appointment arranged by his friend Charles Gavan Duffy while he was Premier of Victoria.

⁴⁵ Edwards, *The Paris Commune 1871*, 2.

⁴⁶ Edwards, *The Paris Commune 1871*, 2–3.

⁴⁷ Hoey, "Red" Paris on Easter Sunday', 163.

In 1874 when he was visiting London Gavan Duffy stayed for a few days with Cashel Hoey explaining in a letter to his wife: ‘Mrs Hoey being in France which left a spare room’.⁴⁸ Hoey also became secretary to the London committees for international exhibitions held in Melbourne in 1880 and 1888 and for the Colonial Museums Committee in London and he wrote for the *Spectator* on Australian colonial subjects.⁴⁹

‘Society and Fashion’ from London

For the rest of the century and into the twentieth century, Frances Cashel Hoey’s letter from London, published under the heading ‘A Lady’s Letter’ sometimes with the subtitle ‘Society and Fashion’, was a fixture. She was the first correspondent to write a regular women’s letter from overseas for an Australian newspaper.⁵⁰ She also maintained her constant output of fiction, she was involved in publishing ventures and she became a prolific translator of French fiction and non-fiction and historical works. Most of her letters which began on May 31, 1873 originated in London, but some were written from Paris or other European cities. From 3000 to 5000 words in length, often monthly but sometimes at shorter intervals, she covered topics such as royalty, upper class social events, public figures, ladies’ fashions, current social trends and fads, and the arts, especially drama and literature. Her items on European royal families were often embellished with her own reminiscences and her accounts of events in other countries were often about something she had seen or heard while on one of her visits.⁵¹ She described society’s foibles with a light, slightly satirical touch. In reporting the marriage of the Archduchess Marie Christine to the King of Spain, she focussed on gossip that the archduchess appeared short and colourless, not the ‘professional beauty’ portrayed in her photographs. In England she described the effect on the hunting season of the severe frost and snow gripping the country as ‘deep discontent’ among ‘the large class of society

⁴⁸ Charles Gavan Duffy, *My Life in Two Hemispheres*, facsimile edition, vol. 2 (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1969), 252.

⁴⁹ *Advocate* (Melbourne), July 2, 1892, 5.

⁵⁰ Barbara Onslow, *Women of the Press in Nineteenth-century Britain* (London: Palgrave, 2000), 227.

⁵¹ Ian Sibley, ‘A Lady’s Letter from London 1873–1908’, *Australian Literary Studies* 11, no. 4 (1984): 503–504.

which has nothing to do but amuse itself, and therefore finds time somewhat hard “to kill” even with all the modern appliances for the purpose’.⁵²

Ian Sibley in *Australian Literary Studies* evaluated Cashel Hoey’s ‘prodigious output’.

Occasionally her prejudices made their presence felt, but by and large, for someone writing within the constraints of conventional Victorian mores, she offered a reasonably objective view of the European scene, as well as some discerning literary criticism. Her columns provided women of the colonies with an accurate and entertaining account of the contemporary world of politics, society, fashion, and the arts, interspersed with interesting reminiscences.⁵³

Hoey made a point of reviewing the latest books by Australian authors. In 1889, she ranked Tasma’s *Uncle Piper of Piper’s Hill* as ‘only the third work of fiction possessing remarkable merit that has come to us from the Antipodes’. The two she considered ahead of it were Marcus Clarke’s *For the Term of His Natural Life* and Rolf Boldrewood’s *Robbery under Arms*. She knew Tasma, the pseudonym of novelist Jessie Couvreur, and had read her first novel, *Uncle Piper of Piper’s Hill* in manuscript, and had advised on a publisher and predicted its success.⁵⁴ She had high praise for one of Ada Cambridge’s novels, *The Devastators*, and for Miles Franklin’s *My Brilliant Career* and she admired Ethel Turner’s *Three Little Maids*.

Hoey shared the interest then current in psychic phenomena and contacted her friend, the Australian novelist, Rosa Praed, following publication of Praed’s psychic novel *Nyria* in 1904, which was based on the supposed life of Nancy Harward, Rosa’s ‘twin soul’ in a former incarnation as a slave girl in ancient Rome. She urged Praed to publish an explanatory sequel verifying the authenticity of *Nyria*; Praed prepared some of this material, which Hoey read and annotated but it was not published at the time.⁵⁵ Many years later Praed incorporated it into her last book, *The Soul of Nyria*, published in 1931.

⁵² Frances Cashel Hoey, *Australasian*, January 10, 1880, 6.

⁵³ Sibley, ‘A Lady’s Letter from London 1873–1908’, 507.

⁵⁴ Frances Cashel Hoey, *Australasian*, January 10, 1880, 6.

⁵⁵ Rosa Caroline Praed Papers, OM64-1, Box 4, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland, Brisbane, 1–9.

From the publication of her first novel to the end of the century, Frances Cashel Hoey wrote eleven novels, most of which were republished in revised editions. She translated well over thirty books by French novelists, historians, biographers, and scientists including two by Jules Verne, several by members of the French nobility and others by Dutch and Swiss authors. Despite her extraordinary output of words in newspaper columns, reviews, articles, novels, translations and her work as a publisher's reader and editor, Hoey appears to have struggled financially even in the heyday of her earning capacity. She may have earned £100 a year for her column in the *Australasian*, the amount the *Sydney Morning Herald* paid Anna Blackwell.⁵⁶ The publisher Bentley paid her up to £60 for a translation⁵⁷ while novels, reviews and short journalism earned varying amounts.

Although minor, compared with Hoey's output as a prolific novelist and translator of French literature, reviewing was a 'welcome supplement to her literary earnings'.⁵⁸ Contemporary reviewers lauded her translations for their fluency, aptness and spirit, and for capturing 'the spirit of the original'. The qualities of authorship of translations were not seen 'as inferior or derivative but rather relevant to both original compositions and translations' according to author, Anne O'Connor, in her study of language and translation in Irish authors. 'There are no apologies, justifications or explanations, rather, the translated text is left to speak for itself'.⁵⁹

The lengthy illness of John Cashel Hoey before his death in 1892 left Frances impoverished. That year she was granted a Civil List pension of £50 per year which continued until her death on July 8, 1908 at Beccles, Surrey, at the age of seventy-eight. She left her small estate to her surviving daughter, Ada Emily Frances, who in 1874 had married John Edmund Fottrell, a member of a well-known Dublin Catholic family of lawyers.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Patricia Clarke, 'Anna Blackwell, Sydney Morning Herald Correspondent in Paris (1860–90)', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* 106, part 1 (June 2020): 29–48.

⁵⁷ Edwards, *The Paris Commune 1871*, 26.

⁵⁸ Barbara Onslow, *Women of the Press in Nineteenth-century Britain* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 66.

⁵⁹ Anne O'Connor, *Translation and language in Nineteenth-century Ireland: A European perspective* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 82–83.

⁶⁰ Probate, 1908.

Conclusion

The popularity and longevity of Blackwell's and Hoey's columns indicate the extent to which Australians were avid for overseas news, even if it arrived two months or so after the cabled news. The importance of their reports of the events in France in 1870 and 1871 rests not just in their reportage, but in the fact that both were participants in the stories they wrote and that their style of writing was outstanding. Once read, it is difficult to erase from the memory the immediacy of Blackwell's description of the effect of the Franco-Prussian war on ordinary life—'Your butcher has gone; your milkman is going' or, on her departure from the capital—'The train by which your correspondent quitted the capital...'. Hoey's description of her first sight of the streets of Paris under the Commune is equally arresting: 'Every shop was shut, many were boarded up...'; as is her account of 'the cannon reverberating in the church and setting the heavy leather doors flapping'. Their vivid writing about the historical events in which they participated took reporting to a level above the mere recounting of facts. Both Blackwell and Hoey were poorly compensated for the millions of words they wrote for Australian readers. Already, in the nineteenth century, the gender inequality that has continued to dog women journalists had become well-established.

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