

## Charles Joseph La Trobe 1801–1875

*Superintendent of the Port Phillip District of New South Wales (1839-1851)*

*Victoria's first Lt-Governor (1851–1854)*

*First Patron of the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution*



*Charles Joseph La Trobe.  
Statue at forecourt of the  
State Library of Victoria*

This article focus on the influences that shaped Charles Joseph La Trobe's life before he arrived in Australia, on his role as Patron of the first Melbourne Mechanics' Institution Committee, and his relationships with individual members of the Committee. Detailed accounts of La Trobe's time in Australia are dealt with elsewhere, including biographies by Drury<sup>1</sup>, and Eastwood.<sup>2</sup>

La Trobe arrived in Melbourne in September 1839. Appointed Superintendent of the Port Phillip District, he assumed the role of general superintendence of the District, temporarily held by Captain William Lonsdale, the Police magistrate. The two men would work closely together in the infant settlement, and would become founding Patron and President respectively of the newly-established Melbourne Mechanics' Institution just two months after La Trobe's arrival.

"Charles Joseph La Trobe is a shadowy figure in Australian history even though he presided over some of the most important and decisive events in the development of the Port Phillip District in what what was then southern New South Wales. After 11 years as Superintendent of this outpost of New South Wales, he was appointed the first Lt-Governor of the new colony of Victoria, a post he filled with mixed success. Nevertheless, he is astonishingly little known as a person."<sup>3</sup>

Drury describes the influences of La Trobe's Moravian faith and education, his years of sojourn in Switzerland, and his extensive travel in Europe and the New World as a young man.

Prior to his arrival in Australia he had been appointed by the British government as Civil Servant in the West Indies, with a commission to inspect the schools in the British West Indies, and report back to the Colonial Office on progress made in educating the newly

---

<sup>1</sup> Drury, D. *La Trobe -The Making of a Governor* MUP 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Eastwood, J. *Australian Dictionary of Biography*

<sup>3</sup> Drury, D. op. cit. p. 1

liberated slaves. He performed impressively in this role and was then selected for the new assignment of Superintendent of the Port Phillip District, arriving in Hobson's Bay on 30 September 1839, assuming office on 3 October.

### *Childhood*

La Trobe was descended from a Huguenot family, whose origins were thought to have been in southern France. His grandfather, Benjamin, " ... visited Moravia and settlements in Germany and in England and, in September 1748, was received into the Moravian Church at its English centre in Fetter Lane. He spent his young life in constant journeyings throughout the British Isles, making Fulneck in Yorkshire his base. He was ordained a Moravian minister in 1754, taking charge of the Fulneck settlement three years later ...."<sup>4</sup> The Fetter Lane Moravian congregation was influential in John Wesley's development.

Moravianism is a Protestant, non-conformist denomination which traces its history to the 15th-century Bohemian Brethren in Moravia, a central province of what is now the Czech Republic. Evangelism is an important aspect of the faith. "It is interesting to note that, typical of the ecumenism of the Moravian faith, not only candidates for the Moravian ministry were admitted, but also students intended as clergy for other churches."<sup>5</sup>

Benjamin's first child, Christian Ignatius La Trobe, father of Charles Joseph, was born in 1758 at Fulneck, and was educated at Fulneck School where his father Benjamin was headmaster and minister for eleven years. He continued his education at a Moravian Theological College in Germany where he " ... developed an extraordinary facility with a wide range of musical instruments. ... [He] mixed in musical circles, counting the renowned musicologist Dr Charles Burney and the composer Franz Josef Haydn among his closest friends. He himself was a prolific composer ... "<sup>6</sup>

Christian Ignatius married Hannah Benigna Syms of County Tipperary in Ireland, daughter of a Moravian minister. Charles Joseph was the fifth of their six children.

"Christian Ignatius was frequently away from his six children while on evangelical missions. To maintain his parental role, he compiled 'Letters to my children, written at sea during a Voyage to the Cape of good Hope in 1815'. These display the care and tenderness of a loving father and reveal in their didacticism his concern for the education and social consciousness of each of his offspring. "<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 17-18

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 18

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 19

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 20

“In his lengthy and concerned letter, the only one in existence, to the fourteen-year-old Charles Joseph, whom he addressed by his family name of Joseph, he recalled his great fear of losing him as an infant at two years of age, from a debilitating fever, and the tremendous relief when the crisis had passed. He went on to communicate to Joseph the great importance of religious principles in living a good life ... that, having been spared a premature death, he had a moral obligation to the God who had preserved him”<sup>8</sup>

Charles Joseph was born on 20 March 1801 in London. “The family had a typical education and religious upbringing of the Moravian faith and it was this strong faith which was to govern his every action and shape his character for the rest of his life.”<sup>9</sup>

### *Schooling*

The children were sent from the family home in London to school in Fulneck, Yorkshire at a very young age, and it was likely that the parents did not see the children often in the years of schooling. The atmosphere at school was a caring one, but supervision at all times was viewed as the best way “... in early familiarizing the pupils with the serious truth that nothing can be obtained in this life without labour and perseverance, and thus habituating them to diligence and regularity in all their pursuits.”<sup>10</sup>

“Joseph evidently flourished in such a system, ... [as] is demonstrated by the wide range of his interests in adult life, and in his reflective and informed personality.”<sup>11</sup> He left school fluent in French and German, and with a keen interest in natural history.

Of his three brothers only one followed his father into the Church, another became an Anglican clergyman, and the youngest a doctor in the West Indies.

### *Early career – 1824-1827*

Following school, until the age of twenty-three La Trobe was a teacher at the Moravian school in Manchester. In October 1824 he became a tutor in the family of Comte Frédéric de Pourtalès in the university town of Neuchâtel in Switzerland. “This was a move which opened up a different future to him, giving him *entrée* to the upper levels of society, and setting him on the path of travel, adventure, responsibility and independence.”<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 21

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 21-22.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 23

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 24

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 28

The Pourtalès family were also descended from Huguenots. Frédéric's grandfather was attached to Napoleon's household as Master-of-the-Horse to the Empress Joséphine, eventually marrying Joséphine's lady in waiting.

For the following three years La Trobe was the tutor of Frédéric's son, Comte Albert-Alexandre de Pourtalès. During this period his adventurous spirit led him to Alpine mountaineering—often without companions as he was unable to afford guides—and extensive touring in Switzerland. During this time he developed his sketching and extended his knowledge of botany and the forces shaping the landscape. These are interests he would pursue throughout his life.

This was the start of La Trobe's writing career; his first book '*the Alpenstock*', describing the physical features and natural history of the areas covered in his journeys, was published in 1829, and was followed by a second edition. This had a wide readership in England. It brought him a level of celebrity and some welcome income. Financial problems were to persist throughout his lifetime.

La Trobe's position as tutor was completed in 1827. Following publication of his first book he returned to Europe in his role as travel writer, extending his scientific knowledge, leading to the publication of a further book in 1832.

### ***North America and Mexico — 1832-1834***

La Trobe's next travels would be to the new world, and at thirty-one he accompanied his former pupil, Albert de Pourtalès, now nearly twenty, on a tour lasting from 1832-1834. It was hoped that this experience would encourage Albert to mature and return to take his place in society. Relations between tutor and charge were good—they would need to be to survive such an extended tour, and the hardships, as well as adventures, they faced. It was on this tour that La Trobe suffered an eye injury which might have been the cause of his blindness later in life.

"The journeying had shown him as a resilient, resourceful and committed seeker after all that the world had to offer. It also made him realise the value of education in elevating man above the most basic of levels so that he could assert himself at a 'civilised' level."<sup>13</sup> These values would be very much to the fore during his time in Australia.

### ***Marriage — 1835***

The following year La Trobe spent four months in Europe, visiting Albert, and renewing acquaintance with Albert's cousin Sophie de Montmollin, the eighth of 13 children of

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 99

Frédéric de Montmollin, Swiss Councillor of State. Joseph and Sophie were married in Berne on 16 September 1835 in a Church of England ceremony. Sophie came from a Calvinist family. The honeymoon was spent at "Jolimont", a property belonging to Sophie's uncle, Comte Frédéric de Pourtalès. "Jolimont" was the name that they would give to their house in Melbourne, suggesting that it held very happy memories for them. They set up house in the property belonging to Sophie's mother and no doubt Sophie brought a dowry to the marriage, which would help set up the new household, especially helpful in view of La Trobe's poor financial situation.

### ***West Indies – 1837-1838***

In 1837 La Trobe was offered a government assignment in the West Indies. "This commission was to inspect the schools in the British West Indies for which missionary bodies had received Parliamentary financial grants in 1835–36, and to report back to the Colonial Office on progress made in educating the newly-liberated slaves."<sup>14</sup> He was away for 17 months, missing Sophie who was pregnant with their first child.

He produced three official reports which were tabled in Westminster. Conditions for La Trobe in the West Indies would have been challenging; he was working under pressure in difficult climatic conditions, always with the threat of yellow fever, and having to rely on his own resources to research and prepare the reports. The officers in the Colonial Office would have been impressed by his thorough approach and attention to detail. But as in the past, he found time to follow his sketching and natural history pursuits.

Two Wesleyan missionaries in the West Indies, like La Trobe, travelled to the Port Philip District. The Rev Joseph Orton who served as the first Wesleyan minister in Melbourne was imprisoned in the West Indies in 1828 as a result of the persecution of missionaries who encouraged the gathering of slaves to worship.<sup>15</sup> Joseph Ankers Marsden, a Wesleyan missionary on the island of St Vincent from 1836-1838, would have met La Trobe, in connection with schooling, during this time.

Marsden served on the Mechanics' Institution Committee of Management between 1845 and 1847.

La Trobe's impressive performance of his West Indies commission would have commended him to the Colonial Office and he was appointed Superintendent of the Port Phillip District of New South Wales soon after his return to England.

---

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, p. 110

<sup>15</sup> Benson, C. I., *A Century of Victorian Methodism* Spectator Publishing Company, Melbourne, 1935, p. 32.

### *Port Phillip District – 1839-1854*

After two months in Sydney being briefed by Governor Gipps, La Trobe arrived in Melbourne on 30 September 1839 with enthusiasm for his new appointment and was welcomed by a population smaller number, but high in expectation. He had had little experience in administration and governance, and was constrained in his duties by the necessity to refer most decisions to Sir George Gipps, Governor of New South Wales, and on a personal level by his financial situation, being on a small stipend, and having meagre personal financial resources.

On his arrival in Melbourne La Trobe declared "It is not by individual aggrandisement, by the possession of numerous flocks or herds, or by costly acres, that the people shall secure for the country ensuring prosperity and happiness, but by the acquisition and maintenance of sound religious and moral institutions without which no country can become truly great."<sup>16</sup>

This was not necessarily what the residents of Port Phillip generally wanted to hear; they had long chafed at the administrative and financial control by New South Wales. They expected the new Superintendent to act decisively and quickly to achieve Separation from New South Wales, and on a range of issues, and did not always appreciate that his hands were tied by subservience to Sydney. The situation was made more difficult by the severe recession of the early 1840s, and later the District was overwhelmed by the events following the discovery of gold in the early 1850s. Declaration of Victoria as a separate Colony was achieved in mid-1851.

La Trobe was a very private man; Washington Irving, an American friend and writer said of him "He was a man of a thousand occupations; a botanist, a geologist, a hunter of beetles and butterflies, a musical amateur, a sketcher of no mean pretensions; in short a complete virtuoso; added to which he was a very indefatigable, if not always a very successful, sportsman."<sup>17</sup>

Joseph's financial resources were limited; he could not entertain in the manner expected by the social elite of Melbourne. His pastimes, unlike those of many of the "gentlemen" of Melbourne, were not in the racing, cricketing, pastimes; his joy was to get away to the countryside – to explore, sketch, botanise, and pit himself against the challenges of the high country. Like artist Eugene von Guérard, botanist, Ferdinand von Mueller, scientist Georg von Neumayer, whom he would have known in Melbourne, he would have been influenced by the great natural scientist Alexander von Humboldt who emphasised his vision that art

---

<sup>16</sup> Drury, D. op. cit., p. 41.

<sup>17</sup> Irving, W., *A Tour on the Prairies* John Murray, London, 1835, p.5 (quoted in Drury, op. cit., p. 71).

could inspire love of nature, and that landscape features should be portrayed accurately. This background and his natural history pursuits would have set him apart from many in Melbourne.

Joseph was devoted to his family, had some close friends, but was regarded as stand-offish by many, and was the target of much antagonism during his years in Melbourne. "La Trobe was obliged to be hospitable and generous to worthy causes, his meagre salary did not allow for extravagance or entertaining on a grand scale ..."<sup>18</sup> La Trobe had brought with him a portable cottage which he erected on 12.5 acres which he bought at auction. During retirement in England he would come to rely on the proceeds of sale of this land to support his family. Georgiana McCrae in her Journal<sup>19</sup> describes the dinner parties and other social occasions, sometimes involving Joseph, but not Sophie who was often indisposed. Andrew McCrae, like Joseph La Trobe, had financial problems. There are pleasant descriptions of Georgiana's visit to her neighbours Joseph and Sophie.

La Trobe's letters<sup>20</sup> reveal more of this nature, and his family and friends, than official accounts. In a letter to John Murray dated 15 December 1840, he writes "My people are rapidly increasing in number, a good-natured, busy, speculative, impatient set, giving me three cheers one day and abusing me like a pickpocket the next, with equally poor reasons for their praise for their blame."<sup>21</sup>

In 1842, to a friend, Brockedon,<sup>22</sup> he says of family: "Mrs La Trobe is pretty well and gave me another little girl about six weeks ago. She is a fine little soul and sings like a (Dutch) nightingale already."

### ***La Trobe's role as Patron of the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution***

La Trobe, as Patron, and Lonsdale, as President, were formally invited to significant events at the

Mechanics' Institution. They were invited to the first lecture in April 1840; two of the Committee members being instructed to wait on "His Honor and Capt<sup>n</sup> Lonsdale" with the letter of invitation.<sup>23</sup>

This would be the first of many such occasions.

---

<sup>18</sup> Drury, D. op. cit., p. 151.

<sup>19</sup> McCrae, G., *Georgiana's Journal: Melbourne a Hundred Years Ago* McCrae, H. ed. Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1934.

<sup>20</sup> Irving, W., *A Tour on the Prairies* John Murray, London, 1835, p.5 (quoted in Drury, op. cit., p. 71).

<sup>21</sup> Blake, L.J., *Letters of Charles Joseph La Trobe* *Victoriana Series No. 1*, Government of Victoria., p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, P. 13.

<sup>23</sup> Melbourne Mechanics' Institution Committee of Management Minutes, April 13 1840.

The Minutes report that on 30 April 1840 five members of the Committee were appointed as a Deputation “ ... to wait upon His Honor The Superintendent respecting assistance from Government in aid of the Institution.” On 7 May 1840 the Secretary reported the favourable reception of the Deputation appointed to wait upon His Honor The Superintendent. A Sub-Committee of three Committee members was appointed to write and forward with the least possible delay, a Letter to His Honour The Superintendent reporting for the information of His Excellency the present state of the Institution and requesting Government aid. It would be reported to the Annual General Meeting in June that "By His Honor the Deputation was graciously received, and every exertion province that is likely to forward the wishes of the Society. ... your Committee, judging from the warm feeling His Honor has manifested in their favour, are fully satisfied it has been strongly recommended."

On 28 May 1840 members of the Committee were appointed to wait upon La Trobe and Lonsdale to solicit Subscriptions towards the erection of the proposed School of Arts and to solicit either of them to take the chair at the Annual General Meeting on 1st June. Lonsdale chaired this meeting and several other early meetings, but there is no record of La Trobe taking the chair at Committee of Management meetings.

### *Relationships with members of the Mechanics' Institution Committee*

We can find some indication in La Trobe's letters regarding his connections with members of the Committee. In letters to trusted and long-time friends he was able to let his guard down.

James Graham, 1839 Committee member and prominent Melbourne merchant, was La Trobe's business agent, and held his Power of Attorney after his return England. Just before Joseph left Melbourne on 6 May 1854 for England, he wrote to Graham responding to a problem concerning a tenant.<sup>24</sup>

There was obviously great trust and respect between the two men, reflecting a good personal and business relationship, which was to continue over the years. La Trobe was not afraid to divulge to trusted friends his feelings about his treatment in Australia. In 1865 he would write to Graham "I think the poor people of Melbourne may have some appreciation for the foresight, if not task, which has secured them their ample means of recreation – Botanic Gardens and Parks on both sides of the Yarra – I have nothing on my conscience on that score. If I had been individually as free to act on my own responsibility in other matters as I happened to be in that I should perhaps have escaped some pail-fulls of hot abuse."<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 47

<sup>25</sup> Blake, op. cit., p. 59-61.



A little later in 1865 La Trobe would write to Graham "My spirit is more with you in the Colony these days than at [?home]. What a stranger I should be with the *multitude*—if I were to revisit it. I suppose that I might walk from one end of Collins Street to the other without being recognised."<sup>26</sup>

In 1872, he wrote to Graham "I have this day addressed a small parcel of some interest to be forwarded to you when occasion offers. ... I have collected a number of documents addressed to me in 1854 ... by old colonists to whom I had applied for information respecting the early occupation and settlement of our Colony. I intended to have made a certain use of this information myself but from circumstances was prevented from doing so [by this time La Trobe was virtually blind]. The day may come however when it may be considered of too great interest to be lost and I therefore propose that the parcel should be deposited somewhere where it will be accessible when the day comes, say the Public Library or other Public Archives. On this point perhaps you will consult those who want to be consulted. ... In sending them to you however I am securing their being deposited where they ought to go." Graham replied "I shall take our friends Redmond Barry and McArthur [David Charteris] into consultation as to the best place to deposit the contents as well as also the proper time to do so. They are both trustees of the Library and both well fitted to give me good advice on the matter. You are quite right when you say that the day will come when the documents will become of great interest."<sup>27</sup> Many years later, in 1897, the manuscript was finally published, having been delayed for a number of reasons. The original manuscript is housed in the Manuscripts collection of the La Trobe library, Melbourne.

Letters to David Charteris McArthur, an 1839 Committee Auditor, who was known as "the Father of Victorian Banking", again suggest a close and trusting relationship. From England, in late 1854<sup>28</sup>, La Trobe writes to McArthur of his high opinion of Lonsdale, the first President of the Mechanics Institution. He also sends his best wishes to "Mr and Mrs Simpson of whom I think much and often, ...". James Simpson held the position of President of the Mechanics Institution for 10 years from 1840. He was married to the sister-in-law of William Henry Yaldwyn, a Vice-President of the 1839 Committee. Family connections through marriage were important in social circles.

McArthur handled some of La Trobe's residual business matters in Melbourne after his return to England. In January 1860 Joseph wrote to thank McArthur for information about his affairs. "They might be in a more promising state 'tis true were the times better and the

---

<sup>26</sup> Blake, L.J., op. cit., p. 65.

<sup>27</sup> Bride, T.F. *Letters from Victorian Pioneers* Lloyd O'Neil, Melbourne, 1983, Preface p. v and vi.

<sup>28</sup> Blake, L.J., op. cit., p. 47-48.

chances of making further sales more frequent than they appear to be. ... I can only repeat what I have said over and over again, that I am perfectly satisfied that you are acting in a manner best calculated to promote my interests."<sup>29</sup>

In an undated fragment to McArthur, La Trobe again refers to Lonsdale who is in England "... He came and spent two or three days with me afterwards to our great contentment—and is still in England preparing the home he has purchased near Southampton for the reception of his family in the Spring. ... He is in excellent health seemingly and as playful as a kitten with the children. You may imagine what a yarn we had about old times and friends. Who should I stumble on the other day in Worcester but *Mishter Brewster!* [1839 Committee member who had switched his vocation from lawyer to Church of England Minister] now the worthy curate of All Saints in that city. I wonder if he ever makes a mistake and addresses his congregation 'Jintlemen of the Djury' instead of 'Dearly beloved brethren'. However I am told he has turned himself out of a bungling lawyer into very active and worthy clergyman."<sup>30</sup> La Trobe was not above ridiculing a member of the Institution's 1839 Committee who obviously had not been in his close circle of friends.

La Trobe's commitments were many and heavy, coming to the Superintendent's role at a time of great changes and turmoil in early Melbourne. Although he developed some close relationships with individual members of the Committee, his interest and warm support for the objectives of the Institution were expressed at a distance from the weekly workings of the Committee, and would have been perceived by him in keeping with the dignity of his Office.

### *References:*

Benson, C. I., *A Century of Victorian Methodism* Spectator Publishing Company, Melbourne, 1935, p. 32.

Blake, L.J. (ed.) *letters of Charles Joseph La Trobe* Victoriana Series No. 1, The Government of Victoria.

Drury, D. R., *La Trobe -The Making of a Governor* Melbourne University Press, 2006.

Eastwood, J. *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. On line.

Melbourne Mechanics' Institution Committee of Management Minutes [Melbourne Athenaeum Arch]

McCrae, G., *Georgiana's Journal: Melbourne a Hundred Years Ago* McCrae, H. ed. Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1934.

*Anne Marsden, Athenaeum Archives, June 2011.*

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 53.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 54.