

## Introduction

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 was then southern New South Wales. After eleven years as Superintendent of this outpost of New South Wales, he was appointed the first Lieutenant-Governor of the new colony of Victoria, a post he filled with mixed success. Nevertheless, he is astonishingly little known as a person. The question of his parentage has often been raised, and although the explanation of his English background is accepted with some surprise, conjecture as to the origin of his unusual surname remains. The historiography has not provided an understanding of the man who was Governor. Apart from a single slender biography which portrays a rather wooden character, other detailed references to him in contextual studies can be numbered on the fingers of one hand. It is only in recent years that a body of primary source material has become available, and use has been made of some of it in this book to remove the veils and shake off the dust to reveal something of the real Charles Joseph La Trobe.

La Trobe was a virtually untried and inexperienced civil servant when he arrived in Melbourne to take up the new position of Superintendent of the vast Port Phillip District in the south of New South Wales. In this role, he was subordinate, primarily to the Governor in Sydney, Sir George Gipps, and ultimately to the British Colonial Office in London. He remained as Superintendent until 15 July 1851 when separation of the Port Phillip District as a distinct colony was proclaimed and he was declared Lieutenant-Governor of Victoria.

La Trobe had arrived at this outpost of the British Empire when the population of Port Phillip was in the vicinity of 3500 to 4000 people.<sup>1</sup> When he left Victoria on 5 May 1854 there were as many as 236 776 residents,<sup>2</sup> at that time one of the most prosperous colonial settlements in the world. He managed the colony through perhaps the most turbulent fifteen years in its history, as the infrastructure of government was established, separation from New South Wales was achieved, abundant gold discoveries were made, and the principal

cultural institutions were created. While the chief aspects of his public life in Australia are reasonably well documented, less is known about his background before his arrival at Port Phillip, and his activities after leaving his official post.

An appreciation of his formation until the age of thirty-eight in 1839 is fundamental to an understanding of the man who became Governor. Early influences created contradictions in him, all of which affected his judgement throughout life, and they may explain why he made some decisions in the course of his life and work, and how he developed as he undertook increasing responsibilities.

Despite the fact that most of those who are today aware of La Trobe and his presence in a fledgling Victoria think of him as having been a significant figure in the State's past, relatively little is actually known about him as a personality. Much less is known about the type of man he was. Very little is recalled of the deep discordancy which prevailed for much of his fifteen years in the colony. Naturally enough, as in any society, there were those in colonial Victoria whose views on almost any subject were diametrically opposed to the ideas and actions of La Trobe. However, La Trobe himself fuelled much of the controversy by unwittingly bringing his own susceptibilities and particular personality traits to the fore in his decision-making as administrator.

This book examines the first four decades of his life in order to understand the formative influences that made 'the man who stepped off the boat' in the Port Phillip District in 1839. A re-examination of his key policies and attitudes and of responses to them in Port Phillip/Victoria in 1839–54 in the light of this socialisation enables a new understanding of the foundation period of the State's history.

In order to reveal something of the character of the man, this book contextualises the life of Charles Joseph La Trobe, and examines his 'continuing vulnerabilities' and his interaction with society, so as to better understand his attitudes and behaviours while in Australia. The influences on his character, and the commitments, both personal and public, he made during his life, go some way towards explaining his public behaviour.

Until now, the public man has been hidden behind the diplomatic reports and formal correspondence. It is the public La Trobe, therefore—the Superintendent and the Lieutenant-Governor—who emerges from what biographical literature there is about him. This

is because, until very recently, no body of personal archives has been accessible to scholars. La Trobe's reputation has, in the past, been projected solely from his official activities as administrator of the Port Phillip District. This may reflect, to some extent, a wariness on the part of previous writers to stray beyond the public façade of one who was so intimately involved in many of the seminal events in the creation of Victoria. This certainly seems probable, but the simple truth is that La Trobe's personal records did not become available to researchers until the last decade of the twentieth century.

La Trobe was a profoundly controversial character. This is evident from the constant and often scurrilous attacks on him in the press. It is not at all surprising that he had his critics. These were tumultuous times, and everyone in Port Phillip had an opinion, and expressed it, on how their new colony should be developed. More significantly though, La Trobe was controversial because of his unusual manner and style. Everything about him marked him as a man apart from those he had come to govern. All his life his personal conduct was characterised by what was understood as an aloofness, an appearance of snobbishness, but certainly a distance from most of those he dealt with. No understanding of how the man thought or felt comes through from a recital of the litany of his achievements or actions. The vaguest hint of the prophetic role he played in the creation of cultural and scientific institutions begins to emerge with the realisation that his input was crucial for so many of those 'civilising' bodies which continue to flourish today. La Trobe, too, was partly responsible for Victoria's fame as 'the garden state' since he it was who set aside vast tracts of land in Melbourne and country Victoria for recreational use as public gardens and national parks. Much of his planning for Victoria's future culture may be termed 'visionary', since it is only in recent years that the magnitude of his input and forethought has begun to be recognised by the connection between La Trobe and much that is valued as essential to the culture of Victoria. However, at the time, he was living proof that 'Prophets are not without honour except in their own country',<sup>3</sup> so great was the antipathy and the abuse heaped on him.

It would seem, therefore, that the life of La Trobe—the official and the man—is important enough in Victorian history to be explored in all its dimensions. This exploration naturally embraces biographical

elements of the central character, together with a wider study to give context to the personal details. Peter McPhee in his biography of 'Pansy' Wright summarised appositely the two-way demands of biography:

In the end, however, it is precisely the relationship between individual and society, the general and the particular, uniqueness and generality, which is so fascinating about history in general and biography in particular.<sup>4</sup>

By considering La Trobe in these terms, it is clear that he must be assessed not only from the intensely personal angle of his character and attitudes, but also within the context of the constantly changing world about him.

The historiography on La Trobe which covers the period of his life prior to 1839, the year in which he arrived in Australia, is very thin. The only two major biographical works are a monograph, *Charles Joseph La Trobe*<sup>5</sup> by Alan Gross in 1956, and Davis McCaughey's chapter 'Charles Joseph La Trobe' in *Victoria's Colonial Governors*<sup>6</sup> in 1993, and neither of these does more than mention his Huguenot heritage and Moravian education.

While none of the writing about him has been insignificant, historians have not, until recently, had access to original materials which have the ability to shed new light onto the character and attitudes, formed from childhood, which made La Trobe the man he was. Fortunately, a wealth of archival documentation is now available which allows the revelation of more personal characteristics of the man. These papers lead to an explanation of how La Trobe's background—his family heritage, education and life experiences—shaped his character and informed his administration in Australia, thus enabling a new understanding of this complex man and his responses to the environment in the colony.

Peter McPhee, extending metaphors used by Le Roy Ladurie to reflect the historian's requirement for overview as well as attention to detail, has reminded prospective biographers of the need 'to be both "parachutists" and "truffle-hunters", always aware of the broad social terrain as they descend to earth in search of their prey, the experiences of real individuals'.<sup>7</sup> I hope that, while considering my subject as a

man of his time, I have been able to demonstrate that the ‘truffles’ located in La Trobe’s character and life experiences create the mosaic which, from an aerial perspective, reveal the man in many of his strengths and in his vulnerability. In a constructive summary of the necessary elements in the form, M. H. Ellis stated that biography is

not merely ... a record of deeds and events affecting the fate and reputation of an individual, but ... something which sets out to reflect primarily both the event and the growth of the inner life and character and spirit of a particular man or woman.<sup>8</sup>

It is my contention that the ‘inner life’ of Charles Joseph La Trobe—the background, character, experiences in life and the attitudes which he had formed before his arrival in Australia—shaped his administration as, firstly, Superintendent of the Port Phillip District from 3 October 1839 to 15 July 1851, and then, as the first Lieutenant-Governor of Victoria from 15 July 1851 to 5 May 1854.

A preliminary point must be made about the family name of the subject of this book. In France the name has been spelled ‘Latrobe’ from as early as the fourteenth century, and this is the form also used by the American branch of the family. Some Anglo-Saxon branches adopted the form ‘La Trobe’, while the Baltic line is known as ‘de La Trobe’ following the knighthood bestowed on John Frederic by Czar Alexander II in 1864.<sup>9</sup> I have followed this orthographic practice when referring to the different national family groups. Charles Joseph La Trobe’s family generally used the version ‘La Trobe’, although Charles Joseph himself used ‘La Trobe’ and ‘Latrobe’ interchangeably.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Garden, *Victoria, A History*, p. 42.
- <sup>2</sup> Vamplew (ed.), *Australians: Historical Statistics*, p. 26.
- <sup>3</sup> *Holy Bible (Revised Standard Version)*, Matthew xiii, p. 57.
- <sup>4</sup> McPhee, *Pansy: A Life of Roy Douglas Wright*, p. 7.
- <sup>5</sup> Gross, *Charles Joseph La Trobe*.
- <sup>6</sup> McCaughey, Perkins and Trumble, *Victoria’s Colonial Governors, 1839–1900*.
- <sup>7</sup> McPhee, *A Social History of France 1780–1880*, p. 5.
- <sup>8</sup> Ellis, ‘The Writing of Australian Biographies’, p. 432.
- <sup>9</sup> Pierre Latrobe, ‘Le Patronyme’, pp. 28–9.