

Eleanore La Trobe

The First Baptism at St James' Old Cathedral

Susan E A Patterson

Governor La Trobe's Cottage, at the back door to Government House, was often on the route when I walked my children and the dog in the Domain, across the road from where we lived. I was always interested in the cottage as one of my twin aunts had played a significant role in saving the cottage from destruction many years before.

Recently, I read some letters written to my aunt, 'Miss Woods', in the thirties, by Governor La Trobe's daughter, Eleanore, who, at the time, was in her nineties. Pat Woods (Mrs Roy-Applin) was the sister-in-law of John Bedggood whose father's shoe firm had a factory at Jolimont on the site of the original cottage where the governor and his family had lived. Pat was anxious that the cottage be saved and began corresponding with Eleanore in order to find out first-hand information about life in Melbourne during her father's time in office.

Daughters of Samuel James Woods and May Dowling, Pat and her twin sister, Grace, had three older sisters and they all attended Fintona in Hawthorn and Baiwyn. Their father had arrived from Northern Ireland early in the 1890s and had met his wife at the Hawthorn Presbyterian Church where they both sang in the choir. May's family had been squatters: her grandfather was Thomas Dowling who had bought Jellalabad near Darlington in the Western District and it is said had made quite a comfortable living from selling meat to the diggers on the Ballarat goldfields. He was a son of Rev Henry Dowling, the first Baptist minister in Tasmania, and was a brother of Robert, the artist.

With a family background such as that it is little wonder that the Woods girls were interested in Victoria's history: Pat persuaded the Bedggoods to look after the fabric of Governor La Trobe's cottage. Her twin, Grace Swinnerton, has had Eleanore's correspondence tucked away for many years and it is with their permission that I have written this article.

Little interest was shown in the cottage by any authorities until after World War II and even less interest was shown by the National Trust in the fifties when Grace offered them the letters which recently were passed into the care of the La Trobe Library.

Transcriptions of the letters from Eleanore La Trobe follow:

LETTER 1

*Blackwater Rd.
Eastbourne
England
March 15 1935*

Dear Miss Wood (sic)

You cannot think how pleased and grateful I have been for your very kind letter. I think it was so good of you to write me and tell me things I had never heard and thank you so very much. Do you know I have not had a word about anyone seeing my film or hearing my broadcast; not even

from a family, descendant of old retainers with whom I have corresponded; and I am so glad to hear you liked it.

Another fact you told me that I also had never heard, all these years, that is the wording of the inscription on the Tablet in memory of my Mother that my Father had put up over our Pew at St Peter's. Of course I knew about the Tablet but had never heard the words and so you see how much cause I have to be grateful to you.

I am so glad the Bedggoods have had made such a nice restoration of poor old Jolimont and that it has been such a success. The room in which I was born is the one with the 2 windows on the right under the verandah. If you care to see what it really was, there are some very pretty pencil views taken by a cousin of my father's before he left, and now my niece, daughter of my eldest sister Agnes (who the street is named after) has sent to add to them, 2 water colour views taken much earlier, with the pretty view looking over what is now South Yarra, and Station Peak (sic) in the distance. My sister was only 2 years old when she went out to Port Philip (as it was then) with her parents, and I was born 3 years after.

I thought it so nice of you to go to St Peter's. I remember it very well, as we also went there on Sundays. Our seat was the first next to the door, and the Font was just behind, and we were always very much interested as children, watching the number of baptisms, sometimes 15 or 16 at a time. We used to clamber onto the seat and look over the back. When we walked to Church it was through unoccupied unkempt bush and it was the same going into Lt Collins St. I have seen lovely views of Melbourne as it is now, and marvel at the changes.

You say you were writing to me sitting under an elm tree. I suppose by what I gather that a great many of our English trees have been introduced into the gardens and roads such as the Fitzroy gardens and St Kilda Rd. I hope they have not got rid of the native ones, the gum trees and the wattles, and all the beautiful flowering shrubs and flowers that I remember. We used to drive to St Kilda on a rough



Eleanor La Trobe

Archives de Neuchatel, Switzerland. (Used with permission)

sandy road with many a bump in it, and I recollect the beautiflowers (sic) each side. I have lately seen in a big picture paper a view of old St James' Church where my baptism was the first after it was built, so I am at the head of the register. I hear Miss Charlotte MacCartney (the daughter of Dean MacCartney) has been living in Melbourne of late years: she must nearly (be), if not quite as old as I am, as we were quite playmates. She must have been made much of, as one of the old stagers.

I am so glad the Duke of Gloucester enjoyed his stay at Melbourne, and that he was appreciated. Our Royal Family are wonderful, going all over the Empire and making friends with everyone. His Father and Mother, the King and Queen, are staying here just now and are a great attraction. This is supposed to be such a healthy place that the Doctors sent them down here for the King to have a good rest and plenty of good air before the fetes of the Silver Jubilee come on. He had not been keeping well, but his stay down here has improved him very much. They walk up and down the Parade among all the folk just like private people; a lot of my friends have seen them, but I cannot walk more than a few steps. I am getting very infirm and only go out in a Bath Chair once or twice a week. I have cataracts in both eyes so of course my sight is failing, but I can still see pretty well in the one eye.

I shall be 93 at the end of this month and have outlived all my brothers and sisters. I have a few nieces and nephews and great nephews and nieces. Now I must stop; I only write a long letter now and then, but I felt I must send you one, for it is not often one meets with such thoughtful kindness as you have shown, especially from a young person. Please excuse all mistakes, and believe me, dear Miss Wood, very sincerely yours,

Eleanore S. La Trobe

(I was very ill last summer with heart-attacks, but I am pretty well-only have to be very careful)

NOTES: LETTER 1

From Victoria's First Government House 1839-1854
National Trust of Australia (Victoria).

Governor La Trobe was born in London on 20 March 1801. At Jolimont, Neuchatel in Switzerland he met Sophie de Montmollin (born 9 February 1810) and they were married in the British Legation, Berne. (The tablet in St Peter's Eastern Hill gives her parents' surname as de Montmollin Meuron and the date of her birth as 1809) Aged forty-three or forty-four, and far too young, Sophie La Trobe died in Europe (on 30 January 1854) several months before her husband returned from Melbourne. Nearly two years later he married the sister of his first wife: according to the National Trust pamphlet she was Agnes: but according to Alan Cross, biographer of Governor La Trobe, she was Rose Isabelle. The children's aunt became their stepmother.

Wording on the plaque in St Peter's Eastern Hill.

In Memory of
SOPHIE

Daughter of Francois Auguste and
Rose de Montmollin Meuron
Of Neuchatel in Switzerland

The Beloved Wife of Charles Joseph La Trobe, Esq

First Lieutenant-Governor of Victoria
Resident from 1839 to 1853 at Jolimont
In the Parish of St Peter's, Melbourne
And from its formation, a communicant

Member of the Congregation

Born at Neuchatel, 9 Feb 1809

Departed at Neuchatel, 30 Jan 1854

Whither I go ye know and the way ye know

John xiv Ch4v

Father I will that they also whom thou has given me
Be with me where I am, that they may Behold my Glory.

John xvii Ch.24v

Eleanor Sophia La Trobe was born in Melbourne in 1842 (Victorian Births Deaths and Marriages or Pioneers Index). She added 'e' to her name. Her sister, Mary Cecilia (b1843) and brother, Charles Albert (b1846) were both born in Melbourne. The genealogical table for the La Trobe family can be found on page 149, *Charles Joseph La Trobe* by Alan Cross (MUP 1956). At the time of their mother's death Eleanore was twelve and the youngest was only eight.

Eleanore's cousin was Edward La Trobe Bateman, who came to Australia towards the end of his uncle's period of office. He practised as an architect in Melbourne for about twenty years. He designed Heronswood' at Dromana.

Eleanore's hope that the native trees had not been removed was not to be.

LETTER 2

45 Blackwater Rd.

Eastbourne

England

Oct. 2 1935

Dear Miss Cooper (Woods' written in another hand)

I did not expect to hear from you again, so it was quite a surprise to get your nice letter dated Aug.27th. I am so pleased to hear that you were still at Jolimont showing the nice old place to the increased number of visitors: I hope you have told Mr Bedggood that you had heard from me and that I am so glad to hear their kind thoughts about Jolimont has been quite success (sic) I heard from Mr Friday's cousins here that he had lately died. It was through his hearing from his cousins here that they had a Miss La Trobe living in their house that I was 'discovered'. I was very interested to read your Broadcast. I think it was very nicely done, but may I correct one or two mistakes. The vessel in which my father arrived at Melbourne was an English Royal Navy ship. HMS before the name meant Her Majesty's Ship! Now of course it means His Majesty's Ship. Then the name of the colony was then Port Philip: it was not till after its separation from New South Wales in 1851 that it was named Victoria. My father went first to Sydney in a merchant vessel, and then transhipped to the Pyramus to come to Melbourne. Then I have always understood my Father to say there were only 1000 people in Melbourne instead of 4000 when he arrived as you announce

I remember Canvas Town very well. My baptism was the 1st that took place at Old St. James'. I also remember the opening of the first Prince's Bridge. When my eldest sister Agnes was sent to England when she was 7 years old, for her education, it was a whole year before her parents heard of her arrival. You may imagine their anxiety! How different this is now!! You wished to know the date of my Father's death: it was Dec 4 1875 at Litlington Sussex, not far from Eastbourne and he is buried there. We have had such a beautiful hot summer. Now the days and nights are getting chilly, and I suppose we must soon begin fires. My sight is not very good now, nor my hearing, but considering my age, my health might be worse. I am in my 94th year. Again, thanking you very much for yr. letter, I am, dear Miss Cooper (Woods' again in another hand)

Yrs most sincerely,

Eleanore S. La Trobe

You are the only person that I have heard, had seen my film.

Mrs Carlotta Blake (grand-niece of Eleanor), Hove, England with Eleanor La Trobe on the right. C1935. Used with permission.

NOTES: LETTER 2:

Pat Woods made a broadcast one Saturday night about the old cottage. We think it was on 3DB and the interviewer was Norman Banks but we have not been able to verify that.

According to the National Trust pamphlet La Trobe arrived on the ship *Fergusson* with his prefabricated house, which was then erected on twelve and a half acres on a slope east of the Yarra in 1839. His wife, his daughter, Agnes, and his domestic possessions, accompanied him.

It was La Trobe who was responsible for the idea of the Botanical Gardens and he appointed both Baron von Mueller and William Guilfoyle as Directors.

Notes from *Charles Joseph La Trobe* by Alan Cross MUP 1956:

Cross gives La Trobe's second wife's name as Rose Isabelle de Meuron (nee de Montmollin) and the date of the marriage as 3 October 1855 and said she died on 16 January 1883. She was eleven years younger than Sophia. According to the plaque in St Peter's Eastern Hill Sophia's mother was Rose.

Cross p129 The choice of Mme de Meuron as guardian of the child Agnes sufficiently demonstrates the regard in which she was held by both parents.' See Epilogue, Chapter 9, p129 of Cross's book.

Charles and Rose La Trobe had two children, Margaret and Isabelle (p149).

According to the Government Statist as quoted by Cross (page 148) there were 5,822 people in Port Philip in 1839: 4,104 were male and 1,718 were female. Perhaps Eleanore's father was referring to the number of people in the settlement of the town of Melbourne?

LETTER 3

45 Blackwater Rd.
Eastbourne
England
April 30 1937

Dear Miss Woods,

I was much surprised and pleased to get your long and interesting letter on March 1st. I am afraid I have been long in answering, but I do not write easily now, and often feel quite unable to write a letter. I think it is so good of you to have written again to tell me you were still 'care-taking' at Jolimont. It is wonderful how people go on taking an interest in it so long after the Centenary and it is very kind of Mr Bedggood to keep it in good order all this time. I wish you would tell him I said so and thank him on my part.

May 2nd. I was not able to go on the other day, and must now continue. I have been reading and now shall answer your questions. I am so glad to hear you are so much interested in the Mission to Seamen. So am I. I am a regular subscriber and think it is a most excellent work. Of course I am not able now to go to any meetings, but I take the Magazine 'Greater Britain' and read what I can. About Cricket I cannot say much. In my younger days I used to take more interest in it when I had any friends plauina. Now I can only hear of the English victories. We



are now looking forward to the Coronation and only hope the weather will be more propitious. We have had, so far, a very cold spring, such a prevalence of north and east winds. We are very thankful we shall have such a good King and Queen and that King Edward VIII was led to abdicate. He seemed to have got into a thorough bad set, and to have lost all moral and religious principles. He was leading a very bad life by all one hears now and was a source of great grief and anxiety to his Father in the latter's last days. We have got to thank the Americans for leading him in this downfall by all one hears. It is very sad. It must have been a great grief to Queen Mary and his brothers and sister. They say the present King is more like his Father than any of the others and all who have met the Queen say she is charming. So we can thank God and take courage. Thank you so much again for your letter. My sight is getting very bad and hearing is very deficient. I write better than I read. I still get out in a Bath Chair when the weather permits, once or twice a week. I was 95 on March 30

Now I must close,

*Yrs. v. sincerely
E S La Trobe.*

NOTES ON LETTER 3:

The 'Centenary' would have been the celebrations held in 1936 to mark the settlement of Melbourne.

Reference to England's cricket successes must have been to the Bodyline Series of the thirties.

King Edward VIII abdicated in order to marry an American divorcee, Wallis Simpson, and they became known as the Duke and Duchess of Windsor.

The 'present King' was George VI. His wife, Queen Elizabeth, was the centenarian Queen Mother who died in 2002.

Grace's notes: The National Trust was not interested in having the letters when they were offered them in the 1950s. The letters were written between 1935 and 1937 when Pat corresponded with Miss La Trobe: Pat was employed by the Bedggood Bros as Hostess showing overseas and interstate visitors over the house. They had built their shoe factory on the La Trobe land and they preserved part of the original house so that it was able to be repaired and re-erected in the Domain.

Editor's note: these letters have now been donated to the Manuscripts Collection at the La Trobe Library, State Library of Victoria and are reproduced here with their kind permission.