

The Australian works of Céleste de Chabrillan as first-hand accounts of life in the 1850s

Jeanne Maree Allen

Arts, Education & Law Group

Griffith University

176 Messines Ridge Road, Mt Gravatt, QLD 4122

+61 7 3735 1031

jeanne.allen@griffith.edu.au

Abstract

Céleste de Chabrillan spent two and a half years in Victoria during the 1850s gold rush. Although little enamoured of Australia, she used the country as the backdrop for her memoirs and the setting for novels and plays. Previously a dancer, actress, bareback horse-rider and well-known Parisian courtesan, Céleste had forsaken her career to accompany her new husband, Count Lionel de Chabrillan, when he took up a diplomatic position in Melbourne. Finding herself ostracised by polite society, Céleste turned to writing. This paper explores several of her works, questioning how reliable they are as first-hand accounts of Australian colonial life.

Keywords

Ballarat, Céleste de Chabrillan, colonial Australia, French, gold rush, Melbourne

Introduction

In 1854, Céleste de Chabrillan embarked from England on the *Croesus* to begin a new life in Australia, leaving behind a life spent in Paris in an era so vividly described in the novels of Honoré de Balzac and Victor Hugo. As adventurous as she was, forsaking her beloved France

for a country thousands of miles away at the other end of the world was nevertheless no small undertaking. Taking with her, among other things, an adopted daughter, a maid, two lap dogs and a budgerigar in a cage, she left her family, friends and many illustrious acquaintances to marry and set sail with Count Lionel de Chabrillan, who was to take up his posting as a French diplomat in the colony of Victoria.

At not quite 30 years of age, Céleste was also leaving behind a rich past, documented in memoirs that were published—despite her eleventh-hour protestations— at about the same time as her departure. These memoirs, entitled *Adieux au Monde (Farewell to the World)*¹, provide candid insights into the life of a woman never expected to gain rightful entry into the realm of the aristocracy. More significantly in terms of what they spelled for the future of the newly married couple and for Céleste in the fifty years she outlived her husband, the memoirs describe in detail Parisian high society in the 1840s and early 1850s and the activities and predilections of many of the women and particularly men who frequented it. As such, the memoirs were nothing short of scandalous at the time, to the point that they were seized by the police soon after publication. But this would not be the last time that Céleste would speak out. In fact, she went on to recount her extraordinary life in another two sets of memoirs, as well as to publish and stage over fifty novels, poems, plays and operettas.

Background

In *Farewell to the World*, Céleste describes her upbringing as an illegitimate child in Paris and the miserable adolescence she endured at the hands of a rather cavalier mother and her suite of disreputable lovers. Driven from her home at 15 by the sordid behaviour of the particularly ignominious “Vincent,” Céleste was arrested for vagrancy and incarcerated for

¹ Céleste de Chabrillan. *Adieux Au Monde: Mémoires De Céleste Mogador* (Paris: Locard-Davi et de Vresse, 1854). The titles of Céleste’s works will be given in English except where extracts are taken from the original French texts.

five weeks in the Saint-Lazare prison before being claimed by her mother. With the situation unchanged at home, Céleste registered as a prostitute and worked her way up in the arena of love for hire. By her own admission an ambitious and very attractive woman, Céleste soon advanced into the artistic world and gained fame under the name of “la Mogador,” becoming, first, a polka dancer, then quite a celebrity as an actress, a bareback circus rider, and finally a well-known Parisian courtesan.

Among the string of lovers she attracted was Lionel de Chabrilan, scion of one of the great noble families of France, a House of the former Knights of Dauphine and pretenders to the throne of Monaco. Lionel had worked in the French Legation in Copenhagen in 1838, but his extravagant lifestyle and inveterate gambling had led him to squander most of his large inheritance before actually coming into it. His and Céleste’s relationship was turbulent but enduring, with the two marrying ten years after their initial encounter. Financially ruined and with no prospects left in France, Lionel had obtained through family connections the inaugural post of French consular agent in Melbourne. His relocation to the other end of the world might well have suited his family, despairing as they were of his behaviour, but marrying and taking his new bride with him would not. The publication of *Farewell to the World*—which caught Lionel and presumably his family by surprise—would only serve to add fuel to the fire.

The scandal created by the appearance of the memoirs soon reached as far as the Antipodes and Céleste found herself shunned by the polite society of Melbourne, living in relative isolation in the bushland of St Kilda on the town’s outskirts. She used this time, however, to educate herself² and to write a novel set in the Victorian goldfields – *The Gold Robbers (Les Voleurs d’Or)* (1857). Later, she would draw on her diary entries from that time

² Up to this point, she had only had about five weeks’ tuition in the Saint-Lazare prison. *Farewell to the World* had doubtless been written with input and assistance from others, including in all likelihood her good friend, Alexandre Dumas père.

to write a second set of memoirs in 1877, entitled *Un Deuil au Bout du Monde (Death at the End of the World)*. The novel, referred to by publishers in the translated version as “Australia’s weirdest literary curiosity – 19th century lust, rape & murder”³, presents a compelling and rather dark account of gold-rush Victoria at odds with most of the more celebratory Australian travelogues of the time. The memoirs cast Australia in an equally sombre light.

The lived or imagined experience?

Had Céleste been successful in suppressing the first memoirs, her accounts of Australia and its inhabitants might well have been different. Ostracised by the strait-laced society, she certainly had time to observe, think and write. As the French Consul's “harlot spouse,”⁴ she also had to endure snubs, censure and sometimes ridicule, in spite of her work for charity. When invitations came for Lionel, she was often not included, even though, trying to earn her title of countess, she behaved in a way she thought befitted a respectable wife. Governor Hotham, for example, did not see fit to invite her to his ball. Hurt and angry, Céleste commented that the same attitude did not seem to apply to the ex-convicts and even escaped prisoners from the Sydney penal settlement, who attended in significant numbers. She found society, especially the women, hard and unforgiving, and was immensely grateful to those who were kind enough to acknowledge her.

So, are we presented in these works with a rich source of facts, anecdotes and impressions of Victoria in the mid-1800s? Or are we given a picture of the new colony distorted by fabrication, half-truth and exaggeration? Can we ultimately credit Céleste de

³ Céleste de Chabrilan, *The Gold Robbers*. Translated by Lucy and Caroline Moorehead (Melbourne: Sun Books, 1970), front cover.

⁴ *Daily Mirror* (photocopy undated, Latrobe Library, Melbourne), ‘Victoria shunned French consul’s “harlot spouse”’.

Chabrillan with a rightful place among her francophone contemporaries, such as Hubert de Castella⁵ and Antoine Fauchery⁶, as a sincere chronicler of Victoria of the time?

As a work of fiction, the importance of *The Gold Robbers* for the reader of history lies not so much in the plot and characters as in the setting. It is a melodramatic tale of unrequited love, violence and death in Melbourne and on the Ballarat goldfields. There is a rape, twelve murders, a hanging and three natural deaths, but also two births—both illegitimate—and three weddings. While the novel’s plot and much of the characterisation are unquestionably fictitious, the descriptions of Melbourne, of the diggings at Ballarat, and of life and culture in Australian society are authentic and, for the most part, accurate. Many of these unfavourable descriptions are reiterated, in some cases word for word, in *Death at the End of The World* which, although published twenty years later, was presumably written in diary form contemporaneously with *The Gold Robbers*.

So disparaging were these accounts that Hubert de Castella was prompted to write a rejoinder, *Les Squatters Australiens* (1861), and to label Céleste’s novel “a book of guile, disparagement of a land and people she had not known”⁷. Perhaps Castella was right or perhaps the book reveals a land and people as she had known them, under her circumstances at the time. After all, this was a mentally and physically active woman who could find little outlet for her energies. If not in real life, at least in print, she was able to vent her feelings and frustrations and get her own back on the many people who had looked down on her.

Life in Melbourne

⁵ Hubert de Castella (1825-1907), a Swiss vigneron who arrived in Australia in the same year as the Chabrillans (1854).

⁶ Antoine Fauchery (1827 ?-1861), a French writer and photographer who arrived in Australia in 1852. He recounted his Australian travels in *Lettres d’Un Mineur en Australie* (1857).

⁷ Hubert de Castella. *John Bull’s Vineyard: Australian Sketches* (Melbourne: Sands & McDougall, 1886), 23.

The memoirs are particularly rich with reflections and illustrations of colonial life: apart from her own problems, there were the living conditions at the consulate—a four-roomed house in St Kilda—the intolerable weather, the news of the day, social and commercial life, problems of the French in Melbourne, the diplomatic circle and Government House, plus various trips in the country and on the bay. It is very interesting and quite revealing to compare her account of events with reports in the newspapers. Céleste's, naturally, are rather more dramatic, critical or flattering, being seen from a very personal point of view.

The culture shock on arrival in Port Phillip Bay was immense and immediate: after disembarking, we see her walking ankle-deep in mud for two hours to reach the couple's first lodgings—two rooms in a wooden hut—and paying a fortune for a simple meal of ham and eggs on the way. She describes the town as “a few brick houses surrounded by huts and tents”⁸ and the suburbs as ugly and crime-infested. The cost of living is prohibitive: travel by horse-drawn carriages is not only exorbitant but also unreliable and quite often dangerous, and water from the Yarra River, “the town’s sewer”⁹ is more expensive than wine in France. Notable among the constant challenges is the weather, which, were it seen in Europe, “would mean the end of the world”¹⁰. There can be no doubt that Melbourne in the 1850s was a far cry from the Paris that this vivacious woman of the world had left behind. As she remarked herself, she was a Parisian to the core and Australia, judging by her testimonies in *The Gold Robbers* and *Death at the End of the World*, did not measure up.

One of the incidents that stands out is a public hanging near the new gaol (now the Old Melbourne Goal), which she claims to have witnessed at close quarters—close enough

⁸ Céleste de Chabrillan, *Les Voleurs D'or* (Paris: Michel Lévy, 1857), 22, citation translated (trans.) by Jeanne Allen.

⁹ Céleste de Chabrillan, *Un Deuil au Bout du Monde, Suite des Mémoires de Céleste Mogador* (Paris: Librairie Nouvelle, 1877), 84, trans.

¹⁰ Céleste de Chabrillan, *Un Deuil au Bout du Monde, Suite des Mémoires de Céleste Mogador* (Paris: Librairie Nouvelle, 1877), 114, trans.

to describe the distorted features of the victim in detail—on 23 August 1854. She points out the barbarity of this form of capital punishment, suggesting it is a reflection of the people by whom she is surrounded in Melbourne. There was no hanging on this date according to official archives of the time¹¹ but she may well have viewed a hanging that did occur a month later, on 22 September. Dates recorded in her memoirs are often inaccurate. This said, Céleste paints a much more horrific picture of the death than that provided in *The Argus* newspaper¹², where no mention is made of the hangman failing to cover the condemned man's head, his gruesome death convulsions visible to all. Her views are also made quite apparent in the amusing account of Governor Hotham's ball, where there was little more to eat than ham and nothing to drink but a barrel of colonial beer. This earned the governor endless barbs in the press, where the event was dubbed the "Beer Ball." By contrast, the ball for the victims of the Crimea, which Céleste organised, donating all the prizes for the novel tombola, was from all accounts, both hers and the newspapers', a great success¹³.

Céleste also tells of Lola Montez's time in Melbourne and gives a vivid description of her theatrical productions. One of them presented on stage a melodramatic potted version of Lola's life; another was the famous erotic spider dance featuring Lola's frenzied movements as she becomes aware of the spider strategically placed in her underwear. It is hard to know whether Céleste is being disingenuous when she says she doesn't know why the fine ladies of Melbourne got up and walked out of the theatre. Ultimately, it was Lionel who managed to whisk Lola away and onto a boat bound for Sydney. Unfortunately, according to Céleste, her association with Lola provoked new comments in the press about her own past, although this cannot be corroborated in any of the newspapers at the time, including *The Melbourne Punch*, known for its lampoonery of just such events.

¹¹ See PROV, VPRS 266 Crown Law Department—Inward Registered Correspondence, 1856-1863, Part 1, Unit 75 and PROV, VPRS 5136 Criminal Record Books, microfilm copy, reel 1, 1854-1867.

¹² *The Argus*, 23 September 1854, 5.

¹³ See, for example, *The Argus*, 18 August 1855, 5 and *The Melbourne Punch*, January-July edition, 1855, 25.

The goldfields

Most of *The Gold Robbers* is set in the Ballarat goldfields at the height of the rush in the 1850s. In *Death at the End of the World*, Céleste describes her single visit there, revealing how deeply disturbed she was by the experience. Both texts portray the abysmal living conditions and preponderance of crime encountered at every turn. Even those blessed with a lucky find are destined to lose it to thieves or to squander the profits in grog. As far as the eye can see, it is “a huge cemetery where everyone digs his own grave”¹⁴. As Céleste explains it, she and Lionel received a grand welcome there during their official visit and tour in the latter part of 1854, and her descent into a mine was a highlight for the many spectators attending. Interestingly, none of the papers, including *The Ballarat Times*, refer to the Chabrilans’ visit, which suggests that the event was not as celebrated as Céleste would have us believe. Additionally, it was during this same period that the governor and his wife made an inspection of the goldfields, with Lady Hotham reported as making a great impression on the miners¹⁵. Did these reports perhaps influence Céleste in her account of the Ballarat trip? Can we be certain that she made the trip at all?¹⁶ It was not uncommon for travellers and immigrants who took up the pen to stretch the truth from time to time and mix a little fiction with genuine experience.

The Eureka Stockade stands out in her diary entries during this period. Accounts of the agitation on the Ballarat goldfields no doubt reached Céleste via the newspapers, as well as from her husband who involved himself in the controversy by publishing a proclamation to French expatriates residing in Victoria, advising them to dissociate themselves from the

¹⁴ Céleste de Chabrilan, *Les Voleurs D'or* (Paris: Michel Lévy, 1857), 99, trans. and Céleste de Chabrilan, *Un Deuil au Bout du Monde, Suite des Mémoires de Céleste Mogador* (Paris: Librairie Nouvelle, 1877), 89, trans.

¹⁵ See, for example, *The Ballarat Times*, 2 September 1854, 4.

¹⁶ Inspiration for her narrative might also have come from Lionel who spent time in NSW in 1852-53, having left France and his many creditors to try his luck on the Bathurst goldfields. He returned to France, destitute.

uprising¹⁷. A quite dramatic turn of events occurs at this time, as Céleste tells it in the memoirs. A French sailor named Pierre P*** was arrested for the murder of a policeman and taken to the French Consulate en route to prison. Lionel's advice to the hapless fellow was to use the same knife with which he had committed the crime to take his own life. In this way, Lionel would not have to suffer the ignominy of seeing a Frenchman hanged. The next day, the prisoner was found dead in his cell; by his side was a note thanking the consul for his sound advice to carry out such a worthy act of courage. It is intriguing that this event, of which here is no trace in the newspapers or Registry of Death, implies that, despite being arrested and imprisoned, the culprit was still in possession of the murder weapon!

The French consul

Just as there is scope to assume some over-dramatisation in parts of the memoirs, there are also deliberate omissions. For example, in March 1856, the papers¹⁸ describe Lionel's intervention in a duel about to take place between two Frenchmen. Police arrested one of the men but the other was offered consular protection, placing him beyond apprehension. The police and the court were incensed and papers scathing in their criticism of the consul. Seizing upon the opportunity, *The Argus* went on to relate other cases of the consul's poor conduct, including his refusal to attend a theatre production because he was not reserved a front row seat, and his publicly expressed indignation when one of the local papers published an unflattering picture of him. None of this is recounted by Céleste, who fairly consistently portrays Lionel as a noble character and most worthy of his role in public office.

Indeed, it would be fair to claim that these and many other instances of omission and embellishment serve to aggrandise the Chabrellans' public lives in the colony. Against the

¹⁷ The proclamation, dated 3 December 1854, can be found at Sovereign Hill, Victoria.

¹⁸ See, for example, *The Argus*, 15 March 1856, 4.

backdrop of a dissolute society, Céleste projects herself and her husband as models of rectitude—an image that sits rather uncomfortably at times with what we know of Céleste’s and Lionel’s pasts and yet adds spice to her account of their personal lives. One might actually argue that the love story woven through the memoirs is almost as interesting as the people, places and events she describes. This is one of the things that distinguishes the book from most other accounts of life in the colony. Céleste is quite aware of the effect of a love story on her readers and we often see her kissing Lionel's hand or throwing herself at his feet when feelings of love or gratitude overwhelm her, giving the narrative a sentimental flavour that is not without charm.

Conclusion

The prominence of *The Gold Robbers* at its time of publication in France cannot be overlooked: it was one of the very first fictitious works written in French to be based upon first-hand experiences of Australia. It is little wonder that French readers were captivated by the novel, set in a land about which little was known and much was conjectured. France and the European continent first heard of the gold rush in 1852 and the news generated much interest in the exotic Great South Land. A *ripper of a yarn*, it is perhaps best appraised in the words of Alexandre Dumas *père*, a contemporary and close companion of Céleste:

For two nights I saw the dawn come up while I was still reading *The Gold Robbers*. ... I felt as though I were reading a novel by poor Ferry, *The Trapper* or *Castal the Indian*. The same energy in the characterisation, the same life in the characters, the same feverish activity in the plot. Both writers have been eye-witnesses, and being able to see is a tremendous thing when one is a gifted

observer. ... If you are among those who like fast-moving descriptions, deep and soul-searing emotions, read *The Gold Robbers*.¹⁹

Dumas and other supporters provided a dual service in promoting *The Gold Robbers*: accolades of this type not only benefitted Céleste personally in her quest to make a living through writing, they also served to promote the contribution of female authors to the development of the crime fiction genre, which had gone largely unrecognised at that time²⁰.

One of the qualities of her Australian works is that they present life in colonial Victoria from the point of view of a French woman. There were several English women of high social standing living in the colony at the time but Céleste was one of the first notable women with experience of the European continent to stay in Victoria. *The Gold Robbers* was not the first French novel set in Australia, but the handful of books that preceded it were either juvenile fiction or imaginary tales based on second-hand information masquerading as authentic accounts. Céleste's was the first novel to be written by someone who had actually lived here.

Be it as revenge against a society that refused to accept her, her writer's skill to sensationalise what she saw around her, or (most likely) a combination of both, Céleste had little good to say about Australia and was pleased to return home after spending two and a half years in the colony²¹. Nevertheless, our country was to feature strongly in her publications in the following years. Two later novels, *Les Deux Soeurs Emigrantes et*

¹⁹ Alexandre Dumas, *Revue de Paris*, 15 August 1857, cited in Patricia Clancy and Jeanne Maree Allen, *The French Consul's Wife: Memoirs of Céleste de Chabrilan in Gold-Rush Australia* (Carlton Sth, Vic: Melbourne University Press, 1998), 182.

²⁰ See, for example, Kate Watson, *Women Writing Crime Fiction, 1860-1880: Fourteen American, British and Australian Authors* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2012).

²¹ She left to try to extricate her husband from the hands of his many creditors, and was never to return. Lionel died of dysentery in Melbourne in 1858 and is buried in the Melbourne General Cemetery.

Déportées (The Two Sisters) (1876) and *Miss Pewel* (1859), combine melodrama with a certain amount of realism in tales of life and adventure on board ship and in far-distant Australia, which Céleste was well aware had captured the imagination of the French reading public. Encouraged and assisted by Alexandre Dumas *père*, she dramatised and staged *The Gold Robbers* (1864) and wrote another Australian-based play, *En Australie* (1862). In 1872, she also lectured on the subject of her life and travels in Australia on a tour through the main cities of Belgium.

In conclusion, a close reading of *The Gold Robbers* and *Death at the End of the World* reveals rich and authentic depictions of life in the colony. The memoirs, in particular, give the modern reader a first-hand and very personal account of gold-rush Victoria in the hectic 1850s. We first witness the Chabrilans' outward journey and life on board the passenger ship, with all its adventures and misadventures; then we discover the rapidly growing town of Melbourne, such a shock to Céleste with her Parisian tastes; we read of life in the colony, its land and goldfields, people and society; and the impressions, feelings and reactions of settlers in the frontier land. In sum, the memoirs are essentially a broadly accurate and comprehensive account of life, providing us with the unique testimony of a Frenchwoman who left a sophisticated life in Paris to experience a very different kind in the harsh and heady days of gold-rush Victoria. There can be little doubt that Céleste's works have a rightful place among credible first-hand accounts of life during that momentous time in Australia's history.

Disclosure statement

This paper provides a snapshot of the research undertaken for the author's unpublished Master of Arts degree (1990), later used to inform annotations in *The French Consul's Wife* (1998).

Biographical note

Jeanne Allen studied French language and literature at the University of Melbourne and wrote her Master of Arts thesis on a selection of the Australian works of Céleste de Chabrilan. In 1998, she co-translated and annotated Céleste's second set of memoirs, *The French Consul's Wife*, and, in 2015, her third memoirs, *Courtesan and Countess: The Lost and Found Memoirs of the French Consul's Wife*. Jeanne is currently an Associate Professor in the Arts, Education and Law Group at Griffith University.

References

- Allen, Jeanne Maree (then McLean). "La Véracité des Voleurs d'or (1857) et d'un Deuil au Bout du Monde (1877) de Céleste de Chabrillan comme Témoignages sur l'Expérience Vécue dans le Victoria des Années 1850." (Masters thesis, University of Melbourne, 1990).
- Castella, Hubert de. *Les Squatters Australiens*. Paris: Hachette, 1861.
- Castella, Hubert de. *John Bull's Vineyard: Australian Sketches*. Melbourne: Sands & McDougall, 1886.
- Chabrillan, Céleste de. *Adieux Au Monde: Mémoires De Céleste Mogador*. Paris: Locard-Davi et de Vresse, 1854.
- Chabrillan, Céleste de. *Les Voleurs D'or*. Paris: Michel Lévy, 1857.
- Chabrillan, Céleste de. *Miss Pewel*. A. Bourdilliat: Paris, 1859.
- Chabrillan, Céleste de. *Les Deux Soeurs Emigrantes et Déportées*. Paris: C. Lévy, 1876.
- Chabrillan, Céleste de. *Un Deuil au Bout du Monde, Suite des Mémoires de Céleste Mogador*. Paris: Librairie Nouvelle, 1877.
- Chabrillan, Céleste de. *The Gold Robbers*. Translated by Lucy and Caroline Moorehead. Melbourne: Sun Books, 1970.
- Clancy, Patricia, and Jeanne Maree Allen. *The French Consul's Wife: Memoirs of Céleste de Chabrillan in Gold-Rush Australia*. Carlton Sth, Vic: Melbourne University Press, 1998.
- Fauchery, Antoine. *Lettres D'un Mineur En Australie*. Paris: Poulet-Malassis et de Broise, 1857.
- Verhoeven, Jana, Alan Willey, and Jeanne Maree Allen. *Courtesan and Countess: The Lost and Found Memoirs of the French Consul's Wife*. Carlton Sth, Vic: Melbourne University Press, 2015.