

THE FAMILY OF LA TROBE

von Joan M. Ritchie, Australien

In 1850, Charles Joseph La Trobe, first Lieutenant-Governor of Victoria, the south-eastern State of Australia, wrote to one of his friends who had a sheep station in the western district of Victoria about the aboriginal people in the area. "We must be as patient and forbearing with them as we may, consistent with the repression or punishment of actual outrage," (1) he wrote.

La Trobe went on to add that he would probably advise Moravian missionaries, who had arrived in the Colony in 1849, to pay a visit to the area in the Spring. A month later he wrote again that the missionaries - Messrs Tager and Spiesake - "wish to visit the Murray District, and Tudge for themselves, with the assistance of any kind friends who may be willing to aid them with advice, information and assistance, what their prospects of forming a Christian Mission for the benefit of the poor native may be." (2)

In July 1851, another letter to Mr. Campbell mentioned that La Trobe would be glad if he could supply the missionaries with flour, sugar, tea, meat and blankets for assisting the natives and developing their confidence in both the Government and the missionaries.

Like his predecessor, La Trobe had special instructions to protect the aboriginal population. By the time he arrived in Victoria, the aborigines numbered only three to four thousand and some government officials thought that the race would be extinct in twenty years time because of contact with white civilisation. Personally La Trobe felt a great sense of responsibility for this "helpless race of beings." (3)

It was natural that La Trobe should see the work of the Moravian missionaries as one way to help the aborigines. His family background was closely associated with Moravian missionary work and, as a young man, he had visited the Moravian missions in North America, while he was on a tour of that country in 1835. In his first speech in Victoria, or Port Phillip District as it was called when he arrived, he had expressed a conviction with which he had grown up, that the future depended upon God and the energy of the settlers. He was a man of his time in assuming that the aborigines were an inferior kind of being to white men, and a typical member of his family in having faith in the work of Moravian missionaries to assist them.

La Trobe came from a dedicated Moravian family. His grandfather, Benjamin

La Trobe was a pioneer of the Moravian faith in England. He was a preacher at the Moravian settlement at Fulneck and, later, in London where his simple tomb-stone at the Moravian Close, Chelsea, registers his death in 1786. He was a man of influence and it was recorded that even the King's ministers treated him with marked regard and attention. He was a friend of many notable men in the sciences and in literature, but he was also the friend of quite lowly people. He had a German education and, during his life, he made many visits to the Moravian centres in Germany. He translated into English "The Ancient and Modern History of the Brethren" by David Cranz.

His sons made their impact on the world in their own spheres. Fanny Burney, the English novelist, noted in her diary in 1784 that, "the learned and venerable Mr. La Trobe, and his two sons, each of them men of genius though of different characters were frequent in their visits, and among the Drs. warmest admirers. And in the study of the German language and literature, amongst his most useful friends" (4)

Benjamin Henry La Trobe has been described as "the single minded creator of the architectural profession of the United States of America". He left England in 1795 and pioneered American architecture, playing a significant role in the re-construction of Washington itself between 1815 and 1817. His work in engineering was also of considerable merit. He was a skilled water-colour artist and left a record of the formative days of America which has been collected for publication by the Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore. He took a considerable interest in the work of the Moravian missionaries with the American Indians.

Christian Ignatius La Trobe, Benjamin's elder brother, followed his father's career more closely. In 1787, after studying at the Moravian College in Niesky, he became Secretary to the Society for the Furtherance of the Gospel. In 1790 he edited the first Moravian Missionary journal in English - "Periodical Accounts Relating to Moravian Missions". In 1795 he became Secretary of the United Brethren in England and he was widely respected as a man exactly suited to the position he held. Like his father, he made many visits to Germany on church business. In 1815, at the age of 57, he visited South Africa after the Napoleonic wars to assess the position of the Moravian missions. He recorded his observations in a diary which has become a classic of the period.

Beyond this, Christian Ignatius, like his father and brother, was a man of unusual distinction with an active and inquisitive mind. He had wide and special interests in mineralogy, geology, architecture and painting in water colour. He was also a talented musician, playing the piano, the organ and the clarinet. He composed church music for the Moravian services and published three sonatas of considerable merit dedicated to his friend, Haydn. He also introduced the music of Italy and, more particularly, Germany to England, where he published "A Selection of Sacred Music from the works of the most eminent Composers of Germany and Italy" in 1806.

It is not surprising that the children of La Trobe were also talented and involved in Moravian work in England and elsewhere. As men, they were, like their father, all over 6 feet and always impressive when they were together. Peter La Trobe was a teacher in the Moravian boy's school. He later took orders in the Moravian Church and became a senior bishop. He was involved in missionary activities and, after his father's death, he was Secretary of the Brethren, until his own death on an official visit to Germany in 1863. He was also well known for his books on church music. His brother, John, was curate of St. Peter's, Hereford, and a well-known writer on church music. He was the editor, in 1851, of his father's book: "Letters to my Children," in which Christian Ignatius mentioned that all his children had musical souls.

Charles Joseph La Trobe had some religious training but he became a tutor in Switzerland and wrote a number of travel books which reflect some of the literary talent of his father. Like Christian Ignatius he was a man of wide interests. Long before his Australian appointment, he was considerably skilled in geology, botany and biology. He was fascinated by the challenge of Australia and became something of an explorer, gaining a reputation for hard riding. Despite his demanding position, he tried to keep in touch with scientific developments. His Australian notes record the discovery of "two enormous trees with native figures of large size upon them, burned and worked into the white bark" (5), which he succeeded in preserving for many years. Aboriginal names, red gum trees, spring flowers in the mountains, butterflies on the wattle trees, lizards and kangaroos aroused his interest and curiosity. He also grew native shrubs and flowers in his garden.

Like his father, Charles La Trobe was well suited to his job. He was unassuming but talented, with a quiet sense of humour. At Government Cottage in Melbourne, he often held musical evenings. La Trobe and his family attended Church of England services in Melbourne but his faith remained true to Moravian tradition. As he said in one of his travel books, he felt "that craving after something beyond human reason which may serve as a guide, a craving which is sufficient to prove the absolute necessity of a divine revelation."

It was a faith which sustained him through one of the longest and most turbulent governorships in early Australian development. Despite some harsh criticism and a low salary, he coped with diverse problems and the growth of a new colony, leaving a legacy of hope and prosperity when he returned to England in 1851. Melbourne has dedicated a Library and a University to its first Governor. He died in England, in 1875, after many patient years of near blindness. At Fulneck School, where he gained his early education, his name is on the Honour Board. He retained his ties with the Moravians from 1864 to his death in the post of Secretary of the Brethren.

The remarkably gifted Moravian family of the La Trobes owed much of their intelligence to heredity. They also benefited from the culturally rich environment in which they moved amongst some of the leading artists, writers, musicians and scientists of their day. However, another decisive influence in their diverse development was their training in a Moravian home and in

Moravian boarding schools which encouraged maximum self-development. In "Letters to my Children" it is clear that Christian Ignatius La Trobe had a great affection, respect and tolerance for each of his children. This was in line with the Moravian philosophy of education which was well in advance of general educational thinking at the time. Thus the Moravian heritage to which the family made a notable contribution was in itself partly responsible for fostering the La Trobes' warm personalities and considerable talents.

References

- 1) C.J. La Trobe to Lyon Campbell, 1850. In the possession of G.M. Ritchie.
- 2) ebd.
- 3) C.J. La Trobe to John Murray, 1840, in "Letters to a Publisher", edited by Samuel Smiles.
- 4) "The Diary of Fanny Burney", 1784 entry.
- 5) C.J. La Trobe, "Australian notes", M.S., La Trobe Library, Melbourne.

Deutsche Zusammenfassung

DIE FAMILIE LA TROBE

Charles Joseph La Trobe, Gouverneur von Victoria, einer Provinz im Südosten Australiens, knüpfte Kontakte mit brüderischen Missionaren, um den 3000 bis 4000 Ureinwohnern seines Gebietes, deren Aussterben so gut wie sicher erschien, zu helfen. Er selbst entstammt einer brüderischen Familie. Sein Großvater Benjamin La Trobe war Prediger in Fulneck (England) und in London gewesen, wo er 1786 starb. Er hatte Einfluß am englischen Hof, zahlreiche Freunde in Wissenschaft und Literatur und hat die "Alte und Neue Brüder-Historie" von David Cranz ins Englische übersetzt. Sein Sohn Benjamin Henry tat sich als Architekt hervor und war von großer Bedeutung für die amerikanische Architektur, insbesondere für den Aufbau der Stadt Washington 1815 - 1817. Der andere Sohn Christian Ignatius wurde 1787 Sekretär der "Society for the Furtherance of the Gospel", der wichtigen englischen Missionsgesellschaft, und gab 1790 die erste brüderische Missionszeitschrift heraus. 1795 wurde er Sekretär des englischen Zweiges der Brüderunität. Auch er hatte wie sein Bruder eine starke künstlerische Begabung und tat sich als Komponist hervor. Seine Söhne Peter, später Brüder-Bischof und der Nachfolger seines Vaters als Unitätssekretär, und John, Pfarrer in Hereford, haben die musikalische Begabung ihres Vaters geerbt und schriftstellerisch nutzbar gemacht. Der dritte Sohn, Charles Joseph La Trobe, hatte eine literarische Begabung, wie seine Reisetagebücher beweisen, und ein großes Wissen in Geologie, Botanik und Biologie und war daher von Australien fasziniert. In Anerkennung seiner Verdienste als Gouverneur hat Melbourne ihm zu Ehren eine Bibliothek und Universität gewidmet. Er kehrte 1851 nach England zurück und diente dem englischen Zweig bis zu seinem Tode 1875 als Sekretär.