

## [Smith on Chabrillan, 'The French Consul's Wife: Memoirs of Celeste de Chabrillan in gold-rush Australia'](#)

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**Celeste Venard De Chabrillan.** *The French Consul's Wife: Memoirs of Celeste de Chabrillan in gold-rush Australia.* Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1998. xi + 304 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-522-84775-8.

**Reviewed by** Philippa Mein Smith (Department of History, University of Canterbury) **Published on** H-ANZAU (March, 1999)

Patricia Clancy and Jeanne Allen have brought to life the vivid personality of Celeste de Chabrillan, a former Parisian courtesan, circus performer, actress and polka dancer, who married the dashing aristocrat to whom she was mistress, Count Lionel de Chabrillan -having refused him the first time - and sailed with him to Melbourne in the 1850s, as the wife of the first French Consul to Australia. Through their translation of Celeste's second set of memoirs, *A Death at the End of the World*, these French scholars cast new light on nineteenth-century Australian history during the gold rushes of the 1850s which built 'marvellous Melbourne'. For Celeste had a jaundiced view of gold-rush Victoria which evolves through her chatty, sad and shrewd commentary.

It is refreshing to visit the dusty frontier town of Melbourne through the eyes of an outsider. Celeste encountered coolness not merely because she was French - that was the least of her troubles -but because she had strayed beyond the boundaries of respectability, had done so with flamboyant aplomb, winning many male admirers, and, worst of all, had written about it. The good English women of Melbourne could not have such a traitor to moral womanhood in their midst. Worse, Celeste had succeeded in marrying the nineteenth-century colonial equivalent of a Hollywood movie star, handsome, gallant and of aristocratic blood lineage, who had inherited a huge fortune even if he did manage to lose it all, more than once. It was Celeste who paid Lionel's debts through her writing. How preposterous it must have been to those who subscribed to the doctrines of respectability to have this code-breaker outdo them in social position and walk about on the arm of a man among the most heart-throbblingly eligible in the colony, even if he did succeed in pouring away money. Amidst the promise of gold, that could not much matter. In Melbourne society, Celeste found herself dubbed the consul's 'harlot spouse' - doubly condemned for her past and for having dared to wed a gentleman.

Unfortunately for Celeste, the published version of her earlier memoirs detailing her illegitimate birth, unsavoury adolescence and career as a high-class prostitute and entertainer preceded her to Melbourne. This itself is representative of the Catch-22 situations she often experienced as a result of her 'other' life; she had to earn money to survive until Lionel married her (and after), and her writing only compounded her troubles by making her extraordinary personal story public.

Through this book, we learn first-hand what Celeste thought of her predicament and her detractors. As her translators observe, Victoria was, in her own terms, her land of exile, for not only was she exiled from her beloved France but also often from Lionel's society in Melbourne. Having led a

sophisticated life in Paris as a celebrity of sorts, a theatrical figure and writer, Australia seemed literally the end of the world. The loneliness she endured comes through in her writing. So does her spirit and her love for Lionel. Indeed, the binding element of the text is this love story theme, with Lionel and Celeste both making sacrifices to marry, and then having to endure being separated by misfortune and illness, and finally Lionel's early death.

Though she managed to write a book of memoirs about it, and a novel, *The Gold Robbers*, Celeste only spent two and a half years in Melbourne, with the consequence that she spends a third of this book journeying to Australia and a third returning to Paris. This should not deter readers of Australian history and biography because the voyages themselves are part of the migrant experience, as are the linkages with 'home', in this case with France. The endurance demanded by the length of the voyage on a cramped, smelly vessel is well conveyed. Here too Celeste offers an alternative to the traditional optimistic narratives of migration and gold fever, revealing disillusionment, lost hopes, and erstwhile dreamers returning home.

Her first impressions of Melbourne from an overloaded steamer on the Yarra set the tone for what is to follow: she saw 'uncultivated' fields, 'scraggy, sickly livestock', rotting carcasses and 'misshapen' trees 'lined up in battle formation like a regiment of hunchbacks', and was 'thrown out pell-mell' on the wharf to find her party in a road full of potholes, 'paddling through the mud like poodles'. She adds: 'We look like acrobats moving house on a rainy day.' As for the main street of Melbourne: 'it looks just like a fairground except that the shopkeepers are not dealing in gingerbread but gold. They are almost ape-men, grimacing and contorting their bodies to attract the attention of successful miners and to buy their gold'; while entering shops 'you must lift your dress with one hand and hold your nose with the other', because 'they sell everything' (88-9). Like other diarists Celeste is derogatory about Aborigines. While this is unsurprising to the reader, her comments reveal that Aboriginal Australians were not mere ghosts in the landscape in 1850s Victoria; still very much present around Melbourne, they resisted the tent town's advance by burning fires in attempts to deter the goldseekers.

This publication, then, is special in making available to English-speaking readers the journal of a remarkable woman who deserves rediscovery on a number of counts, not just because she was a woman diarist, nor because she was French and so doubly invisible to Australians; but because of her capacity to reinvent herself, and to reveal her world from Paris to Melbourne. The scholarly introduction is particularly helpful in setting the scene for Celeste's account and in assessing its accuracy for the reader. This French contribution to Australian history is highly recommended; and, even better, it is fun, if sad, like Celeste de Chabrillan.

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