

La Trobe: Traveller, Writer, Governor

By John Barnes

Canberra, Halstead Press, in association with State Library Victoria and La Trobe University, 2017, 384 pages hardback, \$59.95.

Reviewed by Dr Andrew Lemon¹

Biography is the most exacting of the sub-disciplines of history. Scrupulous biographers – and few are as scrupulous as John Barnes – carry a strong moral responsibility to the life with which they are dealing. There can be no short cuts.

Charles Joseph La Trobe, from wherever he now watches, should be eternally grateful that John Barnes chose to be his biographer. Or perhaps La Trobe chose Barnes. Early in the book the author explains the motivation.

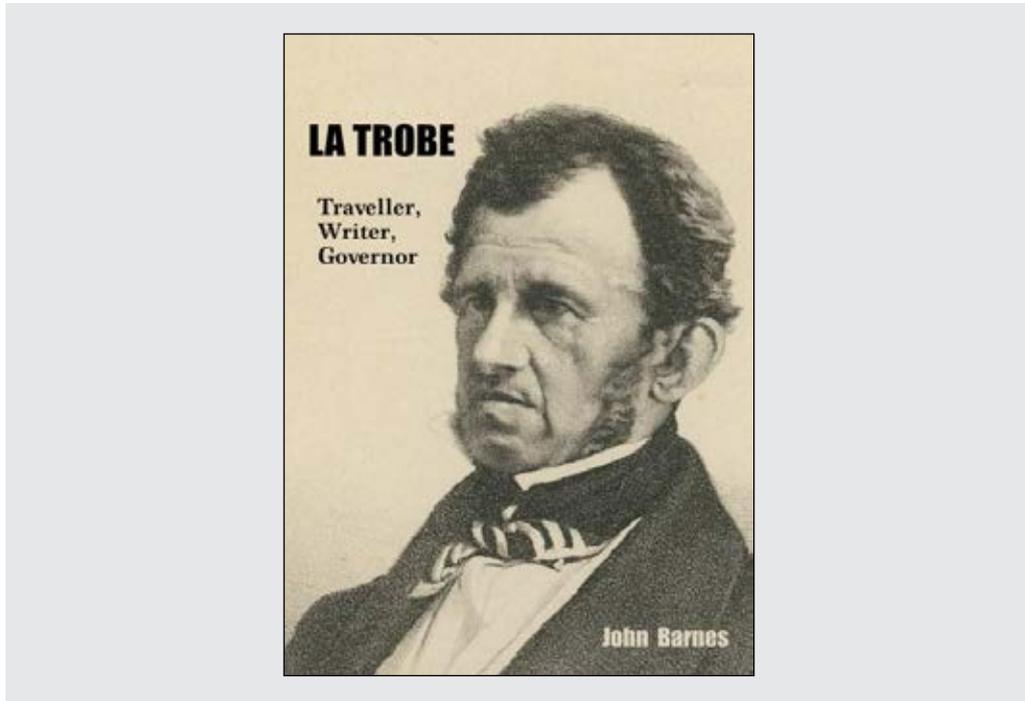
As Emeritus Professor of English at La Trobe University, John Barnes had trodden this path before. His masterful study *The Order of Things: a life of Joseph Furphy* (1990) was followed by his work on Henry Hyde Champion, *Gentleman Socialist* (2007). Meanwhile Charles Joseph La Trobe had begun sparking his interest. After retirement, Barnes had a distinguished innings as editor of the State Library Victoria's scholarly *La Trobe Journal* from 1998, lifting it to new standards. Under his editorship a special issue was published in 2003 on La Trobe's life and work to mark the re-naming of the refurbished Domed Reading Room.

Barnes's original intention in tackling a full biography, he says, was 'to tell the story of his life as a whole, making him known in a way that I do not think has been attempted previously,

and to represent his beliefs and motivations more fully'. In this he is entirely successful. He also succeeds in shifting emphasis from La Trobe's fifteen years in Australia, 'to place his colonial experience in the context of his life, and show what that experience meant to him'. Although he did not set out to challenge 'the received view of La Trobe's governorship', writing history is an organic process, and Barnes discovered new insights into La Trobe's challenges, achievements and failures, as founding Superintendent and first Lieutenant-Governor.

Carefully reviewing the literature on La Trobe at the outset, and recapitulating contemporary and historical assessments in a final chapter, Barnes structures his book as a narrative that gives nine chapters to La Trobe's life before Australia, eight thematic chapters to his time in Victoria, and two to the twenty remaining years after the 'End of Exile'. To his dignified dismay, La Trobe was never rewarded with further government office. This was despite acquitting himself in Victoria with courage, dignity, forbearance and probity in his public and private life. Even extracting a modest pension from the British government proved no easy feat.

The great strength of this book, in addition to its clear and elegant prose, is its fair-mindedness. Its great originality is its lucid



literary analysis which helps us understand the man. Barnes is ideally placed to evaluate La Trobe as writer, in published works (La Trobe's series of 'Rambling' in the Alps, in North America and Mexico), in official reports (beginning with his report on education in the West Indies following the emancipation of slaves), his correspondence in Port Phillip, family letters and surviving journals and notebooks. Barnes is intrigued by La Trobe's own formulation when not yet thirty: 'I still have many thoughts that are not prose, and see many things through a medium, that if not strictly poetic, is somewhat akin to it: yet I find year by year that I have more prose and less poetry measured out to me'. Barnes searches out the hidden poetry.

It is not necessary here to outline the events of La Trobe's life. Readers of *La Trobeana* will be well versed in these but will find that Barnes's biography gives a fresh, well-rounded view of a civilised man. His detailed research clears earlier confusions. Much is to be learned here about La Trobe's actual ancestry and family, the influence of the Moravian faith in which he was raised and the role of England, Switzerland and America in his life. And much is to be learned about the vicious, sustained

and unwarranted hostility levelled against him in Victoria, notably by J.P. Fawkner and by Edward Wilson of the *Argus*, and which skewed subsequent historical evaluations.

Barnes is commendably generous in acknowledging the labours of others. He acknowledges his indebtedness to Dr Dianne Reilly, not least for her work in the copying of thousands of pages of La Trobe material in Switzerland for the State Library Victoria. Her doctoral thesis and book *La Trobe: the Making of a Governor* (2006) was the first to bring to the fore the formative experiences behind La Trobe's personality and outlook. Barnes occasionally takes issue with her 'on some points of interpretation', but says his 'admiration for her tireless promotion of scholarly research on La Trobe is undiminished'. Many of Barnes's references are to articles from *La Trobeana*, inspired by Reilly's enthusiasm. In that way the C J La Trobe Society can share in the credit for this impressive book. La Trobe has the biographer he deserves.

1 Dr Andrew Lemon, former President of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria, has published widely in Australian biography and history as an independent historian. He wrote the epic three volume *History of Australian Thoroughbred Racing* (1987-2008). He was awarded a Doctor of Letters from the University of Melbourne for his published works.
