

## BARRY MCGOWAN

# Marcus Clarke and Felix Meyer's cameo roles in the Paris Commune

Marcus Clarke is rightly remembered as the author of one of the great Australian novels, *His Natural Life* (1874). Writing in 1898, historian Henry Gyles Turner and journalist Alexander Sutherland described Clarke as a 'notable pioneer in the fiction fields of Australia, and one of the most promising littérateurs ever developed under exclusively Australian surroundings'.<sup>1</sup> Although dying at 35, Clarke's output was prodigious and, apart from his great novel, included numerous Australian bush tales, sketches and dramas, and satirical, humorous and critical works.<sup>2</sup>

To suggest that there is anything in Clarke's life and writing left to discuss at length is difficult to believe. But there it is: Marcus Clarke speaking publicly in support of an escaped Communard, Michel Seringue, and prophesying in 1874 that New Caledonia's penal system would repeat the errors of Australia's Macquarie Harbour and Norfolk Island. Only two Australian historians/literary critics have touched on these topics: Arthur Martin in 1884 and Laurie Hergenhan in 1971.<sup>3</sup>

Felix Meyer (1858–1937), although less well known than Clarke, arguably made an equally important contribution to his chosen profession of medicine. After graduating from the University of Melbourne in 1881, Meyer became a prominent Melbourne obstetrician and gynaecologist. A cultured man of letters, his many medical appointments included president of the Victorian branch of the British Medical Association (1894); creator of the board



Left: Marcus Clarke, c. 1874. Photograph by S Milbourn Jnr. Pictures Collection H94.19/1  
Right: Michel Seringue [or Serigne], the French Communist, carte de visite, April 1873.  
Photograph by John Pyrke & Company. Pictures Collection H96.160/2500

of examiners for the Victorian state certificate of midwifery and its first chairman (1916); and member of the obstetrical research committee set up by the faculty of medicine at the University of Melbourne in 1925, which led to the establishment in 1929 of the chair of obstetrics. He was also a foundation fellow in 1927 of the College of Surgeons of Australasia (Royal Australasian College of Surgeons).<sup>4</sup>

Before Meyer entered the higher echelons of medical practice, however, he and Clarke acted separately (though there may have been some collusion) in support of the victims of the French Government's crushing defeat of the Paris Commune and, in that sense, established a Melbourne link to the commune and its supporters, who were known as Communards or, sometimes, as Communists.

### Who were the Communards?

In July 1870 the Emperor Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte declared war on Prussia and, after a series of humiliating reverses, was forced to capitulate.<sup>5</sup> The ensuing Prussian siege of Paris caused considerable hardship to many Parisians,

particularly the poor, and the French love of exotic cuisine was soon put to the test with horse flesh, rats, dogs and cats (or 'gutter rabbits') on the menu.<sup>6</sup>

The siege ended after four months in January 1871, but the armistice terms were ruinous, and some of the new government's actions seemed designed to antagonise the people of Paris.<sup>7</sup> Worse still was the ham-fisted attempt by the French leader Adolphe Thiers to disarm the National Guard, many of whom were opposed to his government. This incident led to an insurrection that overthrew the municipal government of Paris and, ultimately, saw the establishment of the Paris Commune.<sup>8</sup> The commune made a good start in governing the city but in its main task – the defence of Paris – it failed miserably. Confused communications, insubordination, drunkenness and meaningless acts of defiance, such as the demolition of the Vendôme Column, the execution of hostages, and the destruction of Thiers's house, contributed to the military reverses. More telling, perhaps, was the failure of the commune leaders to anticipate the importance of the changes in street alignments of Paris in 1859, which nullified the effectiveness of their defensive barricades.<sup>9</sup>

The French Government at Versailles enacted a savage and bloody retribution, particularly in the last week of conflict (known as Bloody Week). According to historian Alistair Horne, reliable authorities put the number of those killed during the repression at between 20,000 and 25,000. Many of the victims died in battle, but many more were executed, with or without ceremony. This blood lust, fuelled by fear and revenge, left Paris a wasteland of destroyed and burning buildings and reeking corpses.<sup>10</sup>

### Marcus Clarke and Michel Seringue

For those Communards and their sympathisers who survived the retribution only to be imprisoned, their sufferings were far from over, for prison conditions were often appalling and there were many deaths. Trials at Versailles continued until 1875, with over 4000 people being sentenced to transportation to New Caledonia.<sup>11</sup>

One of the first vessels to leave France for New Caledonia was the steamship *L'Orne*, under Captain Vignancourt. On 19 April 1873 it called into Melbourne for fresh provisions and medicine. On the boat were 500 prisoners and 24 women, the wives of some of the prisoners, and two sisters of mercy.<sup>12</sup> Most of the prisoners were 'more or less' afflicted with scurvy, although only three deaths occurred during the voyage. The *Argus* correspondent, possibly Marcus Clarke, attributed the scurvy to the emaciated state of the men on embarkation and the reliance on salted provisions. The prisoners were confined to the main deck in apartments or cages of 'simple but secure construction',

but with ‘unimpeachable ventilation’ provided by square wooden frames supporting vertical iron rods. The insubordinate and refractory were housed on the lower deck, where the conditions were ‘less cheerful’.

Despite vigilant surveillance, one of the Communards, Michel Seringue, managed to escape the vessel. Writing for the *Argus*, Clarke stated that Seringue was acting on a strange notion that any man who ‘touched English soil’ would be free.<sup>13</sup> In the early evening, with the help of accomplices, he lowered himself over the side of *L’Orne* and swam to a boat in tow, which he cut adrift. He later left the boat in order to escape detection. Alternatively swimming and resting, and occasionally fortified with a few medicinal sips of brandy, he made it to the shore, and found an empty shed where he slept until the morning. The next day he met an un-named French resident of Melbourne whom, by chance, he had spoken to when the man had visited *L’Orne* the day before. The man corrected Seringue of his notion that he was free and suggested he follow him home, where he later met Clarke.

According to Clarke, Seringue had served in the Franco–Prussian War as an instructor and quartermaster of gunnery in the French navy. After the war he was conscripted into the commune, where he helped man a barricade. Soon surrounded by government troops, he fled to his uncle’s home, where he was betrayed by persons unknown and arrested. After his trial at Versailles, he was sent to Brest, before embarking on the *L’Orne*. Clarke remarked that, while he was not an admirer of the Communists, he sincerely hoped that ‘the poor devil’ had seen the last of his troubles and would soon be restored to his family. He refuted the claims in some papers that Seringue was ‘a ferocious and ruffianly fellow’, saying that he was ‘overall a decent, quiet gunner, remarkably athletic, and tolerably good-looking’.<sup>14</sup>

The plight of Seringue and the prisoners aboard *L’Orne* invoked the immediate sympathy of many Melbourne citizens, particularly those of French descent. According to the editor of the *Ballarat Courier*, Seringue was ‘quite the hero of the day’ amongst his fellow countrymen in Melbourne.<sup>15</sup> Captain Vignancourt, however, had different views and refused to accept various offers of fruit and vegetables for the prisoners on his ship on the grounds that they were already well provided for. It is more likely, however, that Vignancourt was sensitive to criticism following Seringue’s escape and the possibility that the contributions would be seen as a demonstration of sympathy with the Communist cause. However, Councillor James Gatehouse; Edmund Fitzgibbon,<sup>16</sup> a prominent civic administrator; and one or two French gentlemen were active in the matter and would have sent a small shipload of presents on board if they had been allowed.<sup>17</sup> Another newspaper stated that

many French residents, 'who were wholly Republican in their sympathies', were anxious to show their suffering countrymen that, while not agreeing with their extreme opinions, they were prepared 'to acknowledge the ties of country and kindred'.<sup>18</sup>

This was by no means the end of the correspondence, or of Clarke's involvement with Seringue. Following Clarke's article, several letters from the Communards on *L'Orne* were published in the *Argus*. One letter told of the generally cramped conditions on board the ship, particularly for those on the lower deck; the poor food and wine rations; the lack of medicine; the prevailing sickness; and the attempts by the gaolers to steal the men's wine rations. A second letter, signed by the Communards Baillère, Rozes and Basuyon, thanked the good folk of Melbourne, some of whom had visited the ship, for their sympathy, good feelings and friendliness, which had 'rejoiced' their hearts. A third letter also bemoaned the poor rations and the constant goading and provocation by the guards.<sup>19</sup>

Some days later, Clarke wrote to the *Argus* asking for a subscription list to be raised for Seringue:

not because he is an escaped communist prisoner, not because he has performed a daring and athletic feat, but simply because he is a fellow creature, who, without having done any very great harm to this world ... is now amongst us without English, without money, without clothes, almost without friends.

The editor agreed to Clarke's plea and subscriptions totalling £9 6d were received from several individuals in amounts of between one and two pounds.<sup>20</sup>

The unknown Frenchman's invitation to Clarke to meet the bedraggled Seringue indicates a close connection between Clarke and Melbourne's French community and, on Clarke's part, some audacity, for at that time Seringue was being actively pursued by the police.<sup>21</sup> Clarke was an admirer of all things French, in particular the author Honoré de Balzac, with whom he felt a strong sense of 'self-identification'.<sup>22</sup> Clarke's sympathy for Seringue was also consistent with his strong empathy for the poor and downtrodden. As Henry Gyles Turner and Alexander Sutherland remarked, 'His sympathies went out mainly to the men in his own walk of life, especially to the impecunious members of the brotherhood'.<sup>23</sup>

Clarke's politics became more radical as the 1870s wore on, as witnessed by his involvement in a political farce called *The Happy Land*, a satire on the government at election time.<sup>24</sup> His empathy for political exiles is evident in his story 'John Mitchel's escape', which was published in *Old Tales of a Young*



Labour gang, Noumea. Archives de Nouvelle-Calédonie, Noumea. Reproduced with permission

*Country* in 1871. Although in this story Clarke is disparaging and mocking in his comments on the Young Irelander rebellion of 1848 and its leaders, his sympathies with Mitchel seem real enough.<sup>25</sup>

### The Felix Meyer connection

A few days after *L'Orne's* departure from Melbourne, another letter reached the editor of the *Argus*. The writer was not a Communard, but Felix Meyer, a student of Wesley College, whose younger brother had found a message in a bottle on St Kilda Beach. The bottle had allegedly been thrown from *L'Orne* as it left Melbourne and had been washed ashore. Translated by Meyer, the main content of the letter was the all-too familiar circumstances of the suppression of the Paris Commune. Revealing yet again the despair and raw emotions of the prisoners, the writer, 'A Communist', spoke thus:

Up to the 1st of June they shot people in masses with mitrailleuses [machine guns] in all the barracks of Paris; in the irregular quarters of the city the ditches of the fortifications were turned into hecatombs of flesh, palpitating, and often yet breathing.

He stated that it was not surprising that the great number of sick had compelled them to arrive in Port Melbourne, 'which, for our part, we deem happy, since it had procured us the pleasure of entering into relations with some of you'.<sup>26</sup>

There is a question mark about Meyer's story for, in reality, how feasible is it for a bottle to find its way the 18 kilometres from Hobson's Bay to St Kilda Beach intact and with a readable, and presumably unsoaked message? As dux of Wesley College in 1875, Meyer was bright enough to have written the letter himself. His father, a Prussian emigrant, may have also helped write the letter. Perhaps Clarke helped, for his French was adequate enough and, like so many others, he would have been appalled at the excesses of Bloody Week.<sup>27</sup> Whatever the outcome the 'message in a bottle' incident is bizarre and remains a mystery to the present day.

But what of Seringue? Fortunately for our waterlogged hero, all efforts to recapture him by the Victorian police ceased when it was realised that he was a political prisoner and could not be dealt with under the existing extradition provisions.<sup>28</sup> The next we hear of him is in September 1873, when he appears in court claiming £7 10s in back wages from Ludovic Marie, the owner of a Melbourne wine store. Seringue confirmed in court that, after his escape from *L'Orne*, he worked at Marie's shop for nothing, after which he was paid 30 shillings a week. According to his lawyer he was forced to wear the clothes he had been transported in and was used as a drawcard to attract customers to the shop. Seringue later worked in Marie's cellar and drove a horse and cart.<sup>29</sup>

Marie's lawyer submitted that his client had withstood the temptation to earn a large reward by giving Seringue up to the police, and later had refused a large sum offered by a theatrical management for Seringue's 'appearance on the boards'. Marie stated that he did not force him to wear his convict clothes and had bought him another suit, although he had his portrait taken while wearing his old gear. He also provided food, but recouped the money from Seringue's subscription funds, to which he had been a contributor.<sup>30</sup> What later became of Seringue is unknown, but it is more than likely that he returned to France after the Communard amnesty in January 1879.<sup>31</sup>

### Clarke's prophecy

The little-known political dimension to Clarke's great novel, first mentioned by historian Arthur Martin in 1884, warrants elaboration. In *His Natural Life*, Clarke prophesied that France had established at New Caledonia a penal settlement 'which will, in the natural course of things, repeat in the annals the history of Macquarie Harbour and of Norfolk Island'.<sup>32</sup> Laurie Hergenhan



Communards writing and gardening at their camp, huts in background, Isle of Pines, New Caledonia. Archives de Nouvelle-Calédonie, Noumea. Reproduced with permission

has suggested that this statement may have been prompted by the Seringue incident.<sup>33</sup> Regardless of that connection, however, Clarke's statement nevertheless raises the wider issue of the success or otherwise of the French system of transportation and Australian reactions to it.

The French parliament debated the practicability and feasibility of transportation for many years, and many books and pamphlets were written both for and against the proposal.<sup>34</sup> France took possession of New Caledonia in 1853.<sup>35</sup> In Australia, colonial apprehensions were given full voice within days of the hoisting of the Tricolour, with the editor for the *Sydney Morning Herald* stating that:

No sooner, therefore, have we got rid of British convictism, than we are threatened with French convictism. An unlimited collection of Parisian brigands within a short and easy voyage from our northern coasts will tend as little to the security and happiness of the colonists as a similar collection of English outcasts in Van Diemen's Land.

This at least, ought not to be permitted.<sup>36</sup>

Colonial concerns lay dormant until the start of the Versailles trials, when a reporter for the *Evening News* warned that '20,000 Communists, the swampings of Paris, and probably the choicest specimens of cosmopolitan ruffianism' could be deported to New Caledonia. Readers were reminded of the proximity of the French colony to Australia and the scanty force available



for the protection of the free white settlers and the guarding of the penal population. The reporter argued that, while the number of guards would be increased, it was 'scarcely possible' that there would be sufficient to prevent escapes to Australia. That the greater part of the convict population would find its way to the larger Australian towns was 'as certain as that water will run to the sea'.<sup>37</sup>

The reporter's prediction was soon realised with the successful escape of six leading Communards from New Caledonia in April 1874. Their leader, Henri Rochefort, was a journalist and strident critic of the Versailles Government.<sup>38</sup>

Escaping on a Newcastle-based ship, the men soon made themselves at home in Sydney, much to the displeasure of Eugene Simon, the French consul, who rebuked Sydneysiders for their generosity towards the refugees. The editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* surmised that there may have been some 'intended negligence' by the French authorities to allow the men to escape, given that they were all leaders, and in Rochefort's case, sympathisers, of the commune.<sup>39</sup> He reminded his readers that the arrival of Rochefort's group justified the apprehension already felt in the Australian colonies over the establishment of a large penal settlement so close to Australia.<sup>40</sup>

Accounts of escapes soon became a regular feature in the Australian press.<sup>41</sup> While Clarke may have smiled at some of these escape attempts, if still alive, he would have been appalled at the reports in July 1883 of the French Government's intention to introduce a Recidivist Bill, with the goal of sending repeat criminal offenders to New Caledonia in the hope that they would help develop the colony.<sup>42</sup> The editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* was again scathing, stating that if the French Government really wanted to know how penal colonisation worked it need go no further than looking at the Australian experiment, for it was only when Australia's wool-growing potential was discovered that the basis for nationhood was laid. He stated that the French were trying to create an experiment that the British Government had tried under far more advantageous circumstances and found wanting. He predicted that the New Caledonian experiment would be a sure failure.<sup>43</sup>

Although the number of French convicts in Australia was not very large, their presence drew a vehement response from some Australian politicians, in particular Sir James Service, the premier of Victoria between 1883 and 1886.<sup>44</sup> Service ensured that French transportation was a major item at the Australasian Convention held in Sydney in December 1883. At a post-convention banquet he told the French representative that Australia would never submit willingly to have the 'off scourings of any other nation cast upon her shores'.<sup>45</sup>

But what were the convicts and Communards escaping from on New Caledonia? The Communards were not incarcerated and had their own huts and garden plots, and could be paid a small wage if employed by the government. The *Sydney Morning Herald's* Noumea correspondent, Julian Thomas (aka 'The Vagabond'), commented that many of the Communards had money sent to them by friends and had a comfortable if unchallenged life, particularly if they had their families with them.<sup>46</sup>

Hippolyte-Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray, a Communard with the good fortune not to be exiled, told a far different story of political exile on New Caledonia. Not everyone could find employment and, for those that did, the wages were very poor. They lived under martial law, however, and failure to attend the evening muster resulted in imprisonment, and captured escapees and some other offenders were incarcerated with the criminal convicts on L'île Nou, near Noumea. Men imprisoned with the criminal convicts had a particularly hard time of it. They performed the same labour as the convicts, were subjected to the same 'rule of the stick and whip', and were 'beset by the special hatred of the jailers, who incited the convicts against them'.<sup>47</sup>

'This life is really too hard to bear', wrote one man:

in this filthy bagnio, exposed to all insults, to all blows, shut up in grated caves; in the workshops treated as beasts; insulted by our jailers and our comrades of the chain, we must submit to it all without a murmur; the slightest infringement entailing terrible punishment – the cell, quarter ration of bread, irons, thumbscrews, the lash. ... Many of our comrades are in double chains in the correction platoon, subjected to the hardest labour, dying of hunger.<sup>48</sup>

Henri Rochefort stated that the prisoners hated his convict-warden officer, for he was known to deliberately ride his horse through plantations that had taken months to cultivate. He commented that the soil of New Caledonia was very poor and as unproductive as if it were 'near the North Pole', and that the ravenous mosquitoes forced the men to sleep on the top of the mountain with their faces under the sheets. Apart from fishing, their sole distractions were swimming parties.<sup>49</sup>

In December 1879 an inquest was held into the reports of abuse and torture in the colony. One of the worst periods followed the escape of Rochefort and his comrades. Those who reported ill were more than likely to be thrown in the stocks than allowed to see a doctor, and the meagre rations were further reduced by theft and pillage by the guards and other personnel. On L'île Nou, whippings were a weekly ritual, which all other prisoners were forced to

watch. Prisoners were also made to suffer *la crapaudine*, whereby their hands and feet were tied behind and they were suspended from a tree. In France, increased public indignation and demands for an outside investigation led to the establishment of an investigative committee in December 1879. Many recommendations were made for reform. There was one major drawback to the success of the reforms, however: the remoteness of New Caledonia from French society and public opinion.<sup>50</sup> Marcus Clarke would most certainly have concurred wholeheartedly with this as a disadvantage.

Transportation did not bring the benefits to colonisation desired by its advocates. Only a small percentage of those transported worked on public works or for the colonists, and the results from the agricultural penitentiaries were less than expected. According to historian Robert Aldrich, 'any spirit of egalitarianism, much less reformist ardour ... was notable by its absence'.<sup>51</sup> Transportation to New Caledonia ceased altogether in 1897. By that time, according to historian Manuel Cormier, thousands of ex-convicts were wandering around the colony, some of them living by plunder.<sup>52</sup>

### Conclusion

Both Marcus Clarke and Felix Meyer had a hand separately (as far as we know), and in somewhat bizarre circumstances, in raising public awareness of the fate of the Paris Commune and the Communards. Clarke was correct in his prophecy that the penal colony in New Caledonia would be a repetition of Macquarie Harbour and Norfolk Island. His subsequent silence on French convictism is curious, however, for he could have helped sway public opinion in opposing French transportation. But perhaps Clarke felt that he had sounded warnings enough in 1874 and that it was time to move onto other subjects, leaving New Caledonia and the French penal system to Julian Thomas.<sup>53</sup>

More likely, however, was his intense preoccupation with personal and financial matters, in particular, his poor state of health.<sup>54</sup> Ironically, a few weeks before his unexpected death in 1881, Clarke had entered into negotiations with his friend Hugh George for a tour of the colonies and South Sea islands as an accredited journalist for the Fairfax newspaper group and the London *Daily Telegraph*. This venture would no doubt have lifted his spirits and, to some extent, filled his pockets and, like his foray into Tasmania years before, may have provided the impetus for him to embark on a critique of the French transportation system. But this was not to be.<sup>55</sup>