

A Russian Visitor

Aleksandr Leonidovich Yashchenko

It might seem strange to find a story about a travel diary written by a Russian in 1903 on a Carlton local history website. However, it sheds light on a small part of our history. The travel diary of 34 year old Aleksandr Leonidovich Yashchenko records the impressions of a Russian educationist and natural scientist who visited Australia for 3 months in 1903. He landed in Fremantle on the 2nd of July 1903 and sailed for Canada in October of that year. He visited places in Western Australia, South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland and travelled by coach, train and tram, and ferry on the Murray River, as well as on foot.¹

The main objects of his attention were the provision of education, the native flora and fauna, and the indigenous people with whom he spent some time observing football, spear and boomerang throwing and other aboriginal displays. He met local dignitaries, like Frank Tate, the Director of Education, John Smyth, the Principal of Melbourne Teachers' College, the Russian Consul, Mikhaylovich Ustinov, various Protectors of Aborigines, as well as numbers of people who were born, or had made their home in Australia, as well as local indigenous people and those whose job was to protect them. He was generally very well received.

The whole diary is available in the Special Collections section of the Baillieu Library at Melbourne University and makes interesting reading. This short piece centres on part of Yashchenko's visit to Melbourne, time spent at what appears to be the Faraday Street School (SS 112) in Carlton, the home of the first practising school in 1880 and associated with every branch of teacher training until its closure in December 1972.²

Australia had been subject to waves of anti-Russian feeling and fears about Russian invasions from early on, but that worry is not conveyed in this diary, in part because some of those fears had been allayed, when the things feared had not happened and partly because of the productive work begun by the first full time Russian Consul to the Australian colonies, Alexei Dimitrievich Putyata (Putiata) appointed in 1893. Although he died in 1894, not all that long after his appointment, he had successfully set out to show Russia's wish to become acquainted with the growth of the colonies in their social, economic and commercial spheres, to prepare the colony for future relations and to demonstrate Russian goodwill. His good work was carried on by his successors.³

The Melbourne visit involved trips to the Melbourne Museum, the Zoo, the Botanic Gardens, the Royal Exhibition Building, Kozminsky's, the jewellers, as well as visits to educational institutions like the Teachers' Training College, schools, and the Working Men's College. Yashchenko concluded that Melbourne was a first class city of the European type.⁴

A small section of Yashchenko's diary reports that he visited Frank Tate, the Director of Education's office at 9.30am on the 4th of September. Tate then took him to a school, which was empty because of a holiday, and then on to the Teachers' Training College, where he was introduced to the Director, Dr John Smyth. Together they all attended a lecture to the students, to whom Tate explained Yashchenko's presence. They then looked over the Teachers' Training Museum and Yashchenko noted that natural science and geography were not neglected. They

then went into a classroom where the girl students were practising board drawing and then to a physics laboratory, after which he was shown some text books and Tate departed.⁵

After lunch, where the boarders, whose 40 pound subsidy covered board and meals at the College ate similar fare to the Smyths, he commented that tea was taken 'Russian style' and then Smyth showed him some work in progress to transform some vacant land into a flower bed. Smyth then accompanied him to a local school which had observed the holiday the day before. While the school is not named it is reasonable to assume that it is SS No 112 in Faraday Street, for after the Melbourne Teachers' College re-opened in 1900, part of the upper floor was used as a training school.⁶

Henry Gibson, the head teacher received them in his office, a very small room with a desk and a cupboard containing teaching materials, like pencils, paper and texts, one of which he showed Yashenko as soon as they entered. Smyth introduced himself and his companion. Yashchenko observed that as neither geography nor natural history were on the syllabus, because one teacher taught all subjects, some 'geography was cooked up for him' about Canada. He watched and recorded that the 25 boys and 25 girls sat separately, that rote learning appeared to be in place, that many students put up their hands to answer questions but those who knew the answers were the only ones asked. Imports and exports of products was a topic but little evidence was provided apart from the teacher's assertions and there were too many place names on a map which was too small for students to see easily.⁷

After this the visitors went off to other classes, sometimes with three different groups and teachers, separated only by light curtains which could be drawn back for common activities such as singing. He sat in on a drawing lesson for ten to fifteen minutes, with everything done by command with the children sketching like soldiers, one, two etc but surprisingly effective. The drawing teacher also showed him clay moulded pieces which could be changed from a cube to a square and then a cylinder and so on, which he considered effective and original. He also watched how the youngsters wrote on their slates noting that the girls were quite good, although they had only been at it for four months but the boys found it more difficult. He saw a reading lesson where the teacher did not correct mistakes but simply said 'next' and some cutting out work of very young children which would have been taught to Russian children by their mothers.^{8 9}

He made note of the facts that backward children were occasionally given a beating but that the pupils, apart from the very youngest, were completely uninhibited. He commented that his main impression was of a mass of children, taught and being taught in uncomfortable conditions, (for example, three classes together) through coaching and training, by men who were, 'not particularly well educated and were rigid as well' and women teachers who looked like young girls or older women who looked like housekeepers. While it was not a flattering picture of education in Victoria it was nevertheless graphic and believable. Smyth and Tate agreed with his overall criticisms but they said 'nothing could be done as there was no room and no money'.¹⁰

A visit to the same building, now the Kathleen Syme Library and Community Centre, will place this account in context, for the building remains essentially intact, as it registered by both the National Trust and the Victorian Heritage Register. However, rather than large classes of children and harried teachers, you will find a splendid library, meeting rooms, art spaces, technology rooms and a recording studio. It is a welcoming space and very interesting modern use of an outstanding building. We know you will enjoy a visit so we recommend you go.

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References:

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an introduction and notes, by Peter Tilley, University of Melbourne, 2001
- 2 Vision and realisation : a centenary history of state education in Victoria , Education Dept. of Victoria, 1973
- 3 M. Prototopov, *The Russian Orthodox Presence in Australia : The History of a Church told from recently
opened archives and previously unpublished sources*, PhD Thesis, School of Philosophy and Theology,
Australian Catholic University, 2005, p.13
- 4 Travel diary, preface, p. xi
- 5 *ibid*, p. 176
- 6 *ibid*, p. 177
- 7 *ibid*, p. 177
- 8 *ibid*, p. 178-9
- 9 *ibid*, p. 178
- 10 *ibid*, p. 178