

Letters of Charles and Sophie La Trobe to their daughter Agnes, 1845-1853

Excerpts about 'Jolimont', transcribed by Helen Botham.

Sophie's letters are shown in *italics*.

Source: La Trobe Neuchâtel Archive, Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria, MS 13354/folders 27 and 28; and also MS 14152/3. (Original archive is held in the Fonds Petitpierre, Archives de l'Etat Neuchâtel, Switzerland.)

Jolimont 15 August 1845

Papa will tell you how nicely the garden is getting on. This winter he has been planting a great many trees and bushes and we shall soon have abundance of flowers...

As Mamma has told you about the [people] inside of the house I must tell you about the outside ... new stables which have been built against the great brick wall. They are very good & strong, and in the front of them stands an octagonal shed for hay.

You will understand that this stable stands on the site of the old stables, with the intervening hen yard; and that the hay shed stands opposite the central stall. At the end of the stabling just opposite Marquis's kennel I have put up a tool house and taken away all the paling about the great tree – so that a person entering into the yard by the kitchen gate sees at once onto the kitchen garden in the distance. Then at the dining room end of the house I have made a very pretty raised garden enclosed by trellis work which we call 'Agnes Garden' and there your dear little sisters will often walk & play, as it will be pretty well sheltered. Leahy is still our gardener & O'Brien helps him as he did when you were here.

I see Papa has told you all about the household people and beasts. The garden is much improved for papa has been planting a great deal – many Golden wattles, and bushes of all kinds.

Jolimont, Christmas Day, 1845

We have talked much of you these days & your sisters last night had a Christmas Tree with Edith & Sam & Sally & Teddy Lonsdale, just as you had two years ago. ... I write this in a pretty verandah that I have made for Mamma since you left us – which opens into our bedroom by the window in the corner, and which is very cool and pleasant. I will scratch you a plan on the other side which will explain it to you.

Jolimont June 23rd 1846

Dear papa has been very busy in the garden lately – you know that it is winter here...As you remember that it is the season for planting and sowing as there is no snow on the ground... I hope you do not forget all your friends here...Mr and Mrs Gilbert, the Howitts, the Lonsdales, Edith Howitt, Alicia.

Jolimont 3 August 1846

If you were to pop into Jolimont you would find that we have not a single servant that we had when you left us except Charlotte [Swiss-born housekeeper] and no doubt notice many changes particularly about the farther end of the house where you know there is a new verandah. The carriage road, which used to turn there, now runs away three times as far down toward the tank and makes a turn round a big black tree which you may remember – and the old road has been formed into pretty beds full of shrubs. What we call 'Agnes Garden'

is now very pretty, but it would be difficult to explain to you where it is, without a drawing.
[A3 sketch of garden]

Government House, Hobart Town, V D Land, 7th December 1846

In general we think this country a great deal more beautiful than Port Phillip for we see here a great many hills and mountains and you know I had never seen any since I left Switzerland and it reminded me of my own native land. You know that we have left Charlotte at Jolimont to take care of the house and place and of course Rose is with her always going to school and being I hope a good girl. You had promised to write to Charlotte, she is still expecting a letter. She writes to me that it is very hot weather at Melbourne & that the garden is beginning to suffer from the hot wind. Papa brought [home to Jolimont] cacti from Sydney, among other things a pair of beautiful little green parrots, quite small.

Govt House Hobart Town - 3 Jan'y 1847

You will have heard all about our visit to V. Diemen's Land. I think upon the whole that Mama likes the change. Tho' she has all the discomforts of a large, bustling, half-formed establishment ... and although Cecile & Nelly talk a great deal about Jolimont & their return to it, I think they enjoy the nice garden & the gay view of one Bay & Shipping & the fine large spacious verandahs very much. They are very fond of going to hear the Military band play in the public gardens also... This is a very different land from Port Phillip and Mama has been delighted to see the mountains... Tell uncle Louis that I have no time to catch beetles for him... and tell Mr Studer when you see him that I see many beautiful plants but cannot under present circumstances collect them.

Jolimont Melbourne 4th April 1847

We began to have workmen about the house to make some additions to it but I will let dear papa tell you all about it as he will draw you a picture of it at the same time - it will make the house look quite different to what it does in Mr Gilbert's pictures but nothing is finished yet and till it is we shall be rather uncomfortable... Your brother begins to know your picture very well when we ask 'Where is Agnes' he points to it.

Jolimont - Melbourne - Port Phillip - 5th July 1847

Mamma will have told you probably that your sisters and Charlie have now taken possession of my first dressing room beyond the little nursery - and that instead of a door into the little green yard there is a fireplace. I think they are very comfortable. My dressing room as it is now I think I have already described to you. It fills up the angle between our bed room & the old nursery so that instead of that end of the house appearing as it does, I think, in Mr Gilbert's picture - in this way... That end of the house is now so. [sketches of Gilbert's painting and the house] Don't you think it much prettier. The opening marked (a) is the termination of the nice broad verandah which now extends the whole length of the cottage - and altho' now only filled with cacti & shrubs out of flower, is already very pretty. It is 20 paces long. Two steps ascend into it from the carriage road in front and 2 steps more into the Hall - at the far end, where the little open verandah before the dining room was as you will remember, it opens into the new room which however small, we may call the library, and a very comfortable & pretty room it is.

Jolimont - Melbourne - Port Phillip - 29th Jany 1848

Jolimont has not had any alterations made to it since I wrote to you last and told you about our new room and verandah. This spring the garden was most beautiful - full of flowers, & the verandah so full of fine geraniums & cactus of various kinds in full flower that everybody said it worth coming to see. But since the hot weather set in all has disappeared. I think the only important addition I have made to my garden is a pretty rockery - for the sake of various rock plants which I got from Sydney & cacti. This has succeeded very well & is ornamental. I can hardly describe to you where it is exactly - but it is not far from your first little garden, do you remember when you were a very little girl you planted it with pea - there are a few shady trees & bushes & I have put a seat under them... There you have a picture of it. [sketch of the rockery with children playing].

You will tell uncle Louis Coulon from me that I have now so little time or opportunity for collecting that I fear I shall have but little worth sending this year. Uncle Auguste will however receive probably some Van Diemen's Land fossils, which I collected for him.

Jolimont Melbourne 1st January 1849

It is so long since we wrote to you my dearest child that I hardly know how to begin again - there are so many things to tell you, and papa says we must take a large sheet of paper and make a family letter of it, and I thought that I had better begin it today. We think more of you if possible today than on any other day... Your sisters will tell you that we had a Christmas tree on his [little Charley's] birthday, as Christmas Eve was on a Sunday. And we had the 6 Lonsdales and their maman, Mrs Simpson, Mr and Mrs Browne and their three children (you do not know them), Edith Howitt and her little brother about 2 years old. It went off very well, and the little people were very happy and delighted. I must not forget to tell you that Mary Ann [former governess] was there too with her three children. She is going to live at Cape Otway, where her husband has been made lighthouse keeper. She comes often to enquire after you. All the children had an abundance of bon-bons such as they are here. They are very poor, though, compared to Switzerland. ...we shall be very glad to have your picture but when will it come? It seems that everything sent to us must remain for months in London before they are forwarded and we cannot at all understand the reason of it. Well, we must have patience but we shall be very thankful when it reaches us.

Next week we are expecting Mr and Mrs Bell to come and spend some weeks with us. Now we have got an abundance of room for guests, as we have put up the Heads cottage which you know has two good sized rooms. That which was the little store room is a drawing room, and that which we called the Nursery is the passage.

Since I last wrote to you we have made new changes at Jolimont, & the pretty cottage which you remember at the Heads is now in the garden. It occupies the corner where I used to have a frame with some seeds and plants - but the whole locality is so much changed that you would scarcely know it. I will scratch you an outline. [detailed plan of the house.] There, there is a puzzle for you - Tell me when you write if you can make it out.

Jolimont - 7th May 1849

...and if you could see Jolimont, so green, & with all the splendid chrysanthemums in flower you would say it was a pity to leave home. These flowers grow magnificently in this climate and we have so many varieties, 3 white, 3 yellow, 3 pink, 2 buff and 2 deep red that the garden looks as gay as in summer. While speaking of the garden, I may tell you that your willow which you planted with me at the back near the water casks has grown a fine tree - and this year has retained its leaves the whole summer which it never did before, on account of the hot winds. Your rose tree is also alive. But if you came here I am sure you would have

some difficulty in knowing the place – it is so changed by the additions made since you went, and the growth of the shrubberies.

Jolimont Melbourne Port Phillip Australia 4th February 1850

I wish you could see Jolimont now - you would find it very much altered for the better – plants, trees and shrubs have grown so much that it looks quite pretty... We know you never forget the Lonsdales, Mrs Howitt... Edith who has grown quite a young lady – they could find no likeness in your portrait at all. Mrs Lonsdale has had another little baby of whom Papa is Godfather. His name is Rupert La Trobe Howitt. ...I want to tell you about Hannah, who went home with you, you know she came back again, with the Bishop and Mrs Perry, and was very desirous to come into my service to be with your sisters and the dear boy.

Jolimont 10th Sept 1850

I wish we had such a fine stony tower as that of Oberhofen [castle]...in the hot weather. You have no idea how we get baked in the hot winds of summer, for want of good stony walls impervious to heat. In the meantime before the hot weather comes our little Jolimont is beautiful enough in its way, and the garden would be thought pretty anywhere. Your sisters you know take their lessons in the new cottage which was brought from the Heads. That reminds me that if I have not done so I ought to send you a plan or a picture or something to make you more au fait as to our arrangements.

Jolimont 15th December 1850

Jolimont has not undergone any change since last autumn – when mama may have told you we altered & raised the corridor at the back – but still the gradual growth of the shrubberies from season to season always operates some changes in its general aspect and I am sure you would not know it again. Your rose tree is still where you planted it – and your willow also, tho' it has suffered considerably from the water cask into which we found that it had cunningly contrived to introduce its fibrous roots, had to be removed last winter. This is the dead season for the gardens the heat having turned every thing brown, and in fact – with exception of the pinks, of which we have a large & beautiful variety, jessamine & a very few roses – we have now no flowers in the garden. All the fine cactus tribe of which I have a great variety are going out of flower on the rockeries. These ornamental parts of the garden have all been made since you left us. That at the entrance as you drive up to the house is very pretty & covers a considerable space, the highest rocks being 12 or 14 feet above the ground and covered with shrubs & strange plants... The house is so changed that you would be surprised, there is a verandah and where the little verandah used to be there is a room and we have got two nurserys and two rockerys in the garden and every thing [is] changed.

Your sisters have taken a great deal of the two pages left to me to write to you my dear child. I do not like to let this year come to an end without saying a few words to you. How we wish another year could see us on our way to Europe and that we were permitted to see you once more... and all those we love. Papa speaks to you about your picture which dear Gd.maman has the great kindness to send us. We are pleased with it and the more we look at it the more it recalls to our minds our own dear little Agnes whose face as she was 5 years ago when she left us - I shall never forget. ... We shall soon have an opportunity to send you and dear Gd.maman the sketches of you and your sisters and brother by Mrs Stevens - the good old lady who is 76 years old is going back to England once more.

Your sisters [and brother]... They are all three very much delighted at the idea of having a tree on Christmas Eve – as yet we are not quite sure that we shall be able to fulfil what we almost

promised - it is very difficult to find a tree of any kind and still – to find a good one and a fir tree as I should wish to have. And just now the weather has been so hot and suffocating that it makes one shrink from the very thought of it. However we will do it if we can do it well in any way.

Jolimont Melbourne Victoria Australia 28 February 1851

I must tell you that your dear papa is absent from Jolimont having been obliged to go to Sydney. I feel quite lonely and your sisters and brother hardly know what to do without dear papa, even though they do not see much of him at all times, as he is always very much engaged and will be henceforth more than ever. You know we are likely to be separated from you for some years longer – that is to say, if Aunt Rose will consent to keep you and do for you what she has done hitherto – in short be a mother to you. It is very painful, very hard to bear, but we feel that it is the only way to secure to you the advantage of a good education.

Government House Sydney 8 March 1851

I dare say that before this letter comes into your hand you will have heard from mama that I have been obliged to leave her for a while to attend to business with the governor Sir Charles FitzRoy, prior of the final separation of the Port Phillip District from the older Colony of New South Wales... When you were with us in Sydney in 1839 the present Government House was not built – it is a beautiful gothic structure, quite like a palace, and charmingly situated near the shore of this most beautiful estuary, the shores of which are sprinkled on every side with fine villas & gardens.

Jolimont Melbourne Victoria Australia August 30th 1851

I will let Papa speak to you about the alterations made in the house and garden. It is not very probable that we will leave Jolimont before a Government House is built – and perhaps it will not be finished in our time – but we do not know at all events, it is not commenced yet – the grounds are not even fenced.

Jolimont 23 January 1852

I suppose papa tells you how much those gold discoveries have given him to do – how harassed and worried he feels at times. ... For a week towards the end of the year I got very anxious about papa – he had lost his appetite, his sleep, in part – and for a week, or a fortnight we never saw a smile on his face – you know, that is not like him – but thanks be to God – he seems quite himself again, and goes to work with courage, though he is surrounded by difficulties on every side. ...Papa sends you a very pretty specimen of gold and quartz. ... all the menservants – they all went to the diggings. The garden suffers much from the want of a gardener and yet we are still pretty well off – as in some families they have lost every one of their servants – males and females! This wretched gold country! ...Mrs Gilbert is now living on the other side of the river not far from the botanical gardens.

Jolimont 28th February 1852

Jolimont is looking very dry & burned up, but still pretty, from the number of trees – but we live in different times, and we are still but indifferently supplied with servants. We have no butler – and only a makeshift gardener – but I hope George may come back to me for some months... George Waghorn the gardener you ought to remember – he was with us before O'Keefe. ... Old Marquis the watch dog is still living, and little Pepper which always bit

[cousin] Adolph's leg and a very noble kangaroo dog, Keera. We have still an old cat Minnie which perhaps you patted as a kitten, and a number of cows, one of which has given you milk – dear child – Else we have no birds or beasts to pat, but plenty of opossums & native cats about or under the house.

Jolimont 12 June 1852

...what pleasure we have had, young and old, in opening the box from Switzerland, which we have within these few days obtained possession of, after 8 weeks delay since the ship arrived in the Port... Uncle Louis I thank for the painting [of Neuchatel] which I admire very much & not only find very faithful, but well painted... It hangs in the little verandah drawing room over your picture, which is immediately above Mamma's writing table.

Government Offices, Melbourne, 12th November 1852

It is long since you heard from us – for it is not only the worse season of the year for opportunity but this extraordinary discovery of gold in abundance in Victoria has made the crews of vessels in harbour run off to the mines, - and there are many now lying in Williamstown, which do not know when they can get away. However, a small vessel is going to sail for Singapore so we will take our chance of letting you hear of us by that seemingly round about way.

... I write this early before breakfast ... and here is Charlie who generally pays me a visit in my dressing room to plague me with questions when I am busy to get at my tool drawer... Jolimont is very beautiful just at present, so green & full of roses & other flowers... My dressing room window where I write opens onto a little green house at the end of the front verandah – and I have quite a wall of beautiful geraniums before me.

Melbourne, Dec 31st 1852

I cannot let the old year expire & a new one begin without giving you, our dear absent child, some token of remembrance and deep affection. It is an affection which I assure you grows year by year in spite of our separation... I have the further purpose of telling you a piece of good news, which will I am sure take our dear Grandmamma and Tante Rose a little by surprise – that after full consideration it is determined that in a few weeks time dear Mamma and Nelly & Cecile and Charlie and Mlle Beguin [governess] - in fact all with the exception of Papa - sail for Europe... I am sure that the step is the best & proper one for the sake of your dear Mamma & for your little sisters & brother under every point of view, and for their kind and faithful teacher, & I may add for you also ... As to my own plans...as far as my wishes are consulted my separation from my dear wife & children will not be longer than absolutely necessary. Meanwhile I have plenty to do but shall lead a sad *vie de garcon*.

Jolimont January 1st 1853

Dear Papa has ended the year by writing to you, my dearest Agnes- and I will begin the new one by doing the same – and praying that if it is His will we may meet and see each other before many months are over. I need not tell you dear child that if the joy to see you will be great – the prospect of having to leave your dear papa, on this side of the world, is a very sorrowful and grievous one to me – and if I had been allowed to choose, I would have much preferred waiting for him that we might all meet again together – but it is not to be. What will Charley and his two sisters say when they know that they are to leave this country to go to Europe and see their dear sister Agnes? I think they will only be half pleased at first as they always say they would not like to leave their dear Jolimont and their native country.

Jolimont 10 March 1853

I do not know whether the *Melbourne* steamship, by which I send this to England will reach its destination before the *Blackwall*, but I promised dear Mama that I would write a few lines at least to you to tell you that I am now alone & so quiet & lonely, you cannot think, and that all are now upon their passage homeward. Mamma & Nelly, Cecile, Charly, Mlle Beguin & a maidservant... went on board the *Blackwall* in Hobson's Bay on the afternoon of 18th ultimo – leaving dear Jolimont, where we have passed so many happy years together. ... Poor deserted Jolimont! and all there so reminds me at each step of Mamma & the children – that I could almost begin to avoid the sight of it. However, I have so much to do, & such weighty duties on my hands, – that I have no time to sit and mope & grieve. ...Charlotte you know stays with me to keep house & Rose is very useful – In fact I have very good servants both male & female at present. Martha who you know has been seven years in the house – and loves Charlie very much, is still here but will go when she has made up her mind what she means to do. I am writing at Mamma's table in the little verandah salon with your bright eyes looking down at me from your portrait which hangs just before me – dear child! What will Mamma say when she sees them in reality and when shall I see them? —The cats & dogs cannot understand why it is so quiet!

See also fuller excerpts from letters of Charles and Sophie La Trobe to their daughter Agnes —
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