The Republic of Song

Perspectives on French Social History in the Popular Song

by **Michael Adcock**

In 1997, the Baillieu Library's Collection Management Librarian, Juliet Flesch, chanced upon an entry in the catalogue of a Dutch bookseller which listed the collection of the late Robert Brécy (1912–1996) as an item for sale. It seemed miraculous that the library of such an eminent expert on the history of French song should have been available on the market, and even more miraculous that it had apparently not yet been purchased. Juliet's rapid action secured the collection for Australia, and it was duly purchased under the generous terms of the Henry Arthur Pitt Memorial Bequest. In one swoop, Australia acquired an incomparable library of French popular song, such as most institutions around the world could only accumulate by the most painstaking program of acquisition.

The Robert Brécy Collection consists of some 558 items, ranging from books of songs, to whole anthologies of the works of the numerous songwriter/singers who are now forgotten, but whose work certainly deserves to be resurrected. It also includes an invaluable collection of more recent reference works on the history of French song. In this brief review of the collection, however, I shall not attempt to review the whole collection, which has in any case been recorded in the annotated catalogue, *La Chanson de la Rue,* but I will instead invite the general reader to experience the delight of making contact with these remarkable song books.

The rich tradition of French song has the dual attraction of being immensely interesting and engaging for the casual reader, and profoundly significant for the student of social and cultural history. First, the French *chanson* is a well established art form, with its own conventions and its own capacity for endless self renewal: it is whimsical, philosophical, irreverent, sentimental and outrageous all at once. It is an entertainment, but it is also a medium that the French find "good to think with", and as such it serves as a wonderful indicator of the preoccupations, insecurities and aspirations of the average citizen.

Many people will, for example, have heard of famous singers such as Aristide Bruant and Yvette Guilbert, both of whom were inspired by realist novelists such as Émile Zola to engage with the serious social themes of their time. And so it is with rare emotion that one can handle an early edition of Bruant's *Dans la Rue,* which has lively, idiomatic illustrations by the incomparable graphic artist Steinlen.

But the real value of the collection is that it offers us endless insights into the rich lyrical culture of 19th century France, including some of the most charming accidental discoveries. It is delightful, for example, to come across the works of Émile Goudeau (1849–1906). Although nearly forgotten now, Goudeau and his *Hydropathes* club stand out with particular clarity — amidst a century so dominated by all sorts of remarkably serious artistic movements, such as Romanticism and Realism and Symbolism — as one of the most sensible of literary philosophies. The Hydropathes were, as their Latinate name suggests, Haters of Water, and they drank wine instead, in huge quantities. The author should note that, in this admirable role, they served as a counter-balance to another truly worrying group, Henri Murger's *Buveurs d'eau,* who had unaccountably decided to drink nothing *but* water until they had conquered fame and fortune. The modern reader might well reflect that total obscurity would be the better option.

It was, however, not the vinicultural excesses of the Hydropathes that make them attractive, but their enthusiasm. They met to discuss and read literature for the sheer hell of it; there was no pretension, no name-dropping, no

This image and others in this article are from the Brécy Collection, University of Melbourne Library.

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one-upmanship — although there tended to be a lot of "one-downmanship" by the end of the evening — but a lot of good fun. The group was formed in 1878, and they quickly distinguished themselves for the passion with which they translated their ideological objection to water into practice. There was, it is true, a brief moment of ideological panic when the Paris wits seized on the name of their founder and leader, Émile Goudeau, and pointed out that his name could be a phonetic rendering for *Goût d'Eau* ("Taste of Water"), hence a cryptic revelation that he was not as ideologically sound as he pretended to be. But he and his followers applied themselves to the drinking of French wine with such gusto that all such rumours were quickly dissipated. They then commenced a nomadic existence amongst the cafes of Paris, exacting a heavy toll on establishment after establishment due to their noisy behaviour and their very "physical" readings of French poetry, moving hastily from one cafe to the next before they were thrown out. Goudeau was fascinated by the nightlife of the capital, and haunted the cafes and cabarets, his favourite being the aptly named *Le Sherry Gobbler* in the Latin quarter. In 1881, he met Rudolphe Salis, the enterprising organiser of the Chat Noir Cafe, who offered his establishment as a meeting place for the then homeless Hydropathes. Goudeau was to serve as the editor of the journal *Le Chat Noir* for the first three years to its existence.

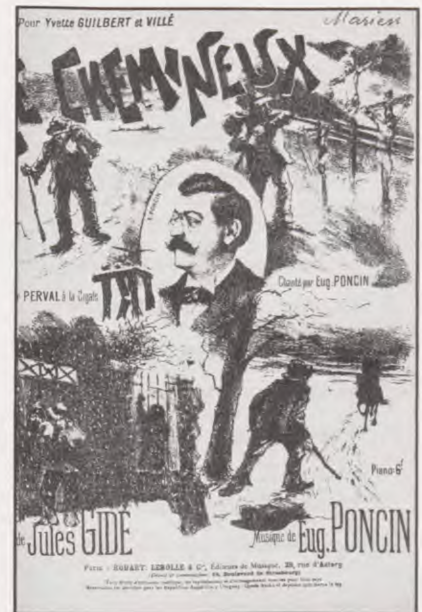
Goudeau's literary career was also a distinguished one. His first book of poems was the *Fleurs de Bitume* (1878), in which he evoked the nocturnal experience of Paris: his "flowers of bitumen" were the rough cafes and their clientele of young poets and the young parisiennes who seemed to have grown out of the bitumen sidewalks of the city. This volume was followed by *Poèmes Ironiques* (1884) and *Chansons de Paris et Ailleurs'* (1896). The visitor to the Robert Brécy Collection will be delighted to peruse an early edition of his *Chansons de Paris et d'Ailleurs,* or to dip into his autobiographical *Dix Ans de Bohème.*

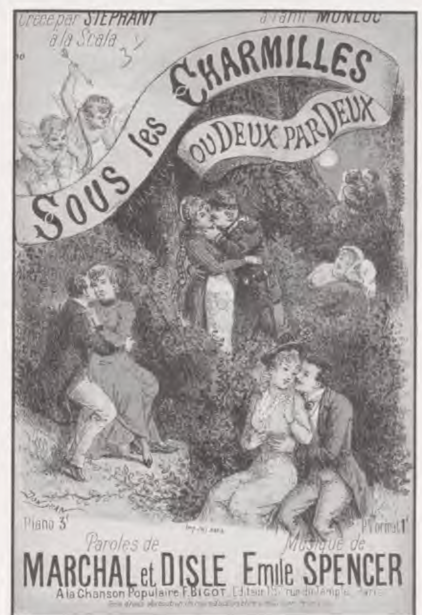
The purchase of such an important collection is, however, primarily designed to provide new opportunities for research, and in this respect the Robert Brécy Collection offers a wealth of material whose depth is only just being realised.

As the historian sifts through this enormous corpus of songs, many of them beautifully illustrated with graphic images, it becomes clear that the *chanson* tradition was serving, like some finely attuned seismograph, to register some of the most profound emotions generated by the remarkably turbulent history of modern France during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The *chanson* has the great advantage of ambiguity: it is serious, but it is not serious; it can touch upon difficult or controversial topics, and yet can do so with a comic irreverence that prevents it from being too confronting.

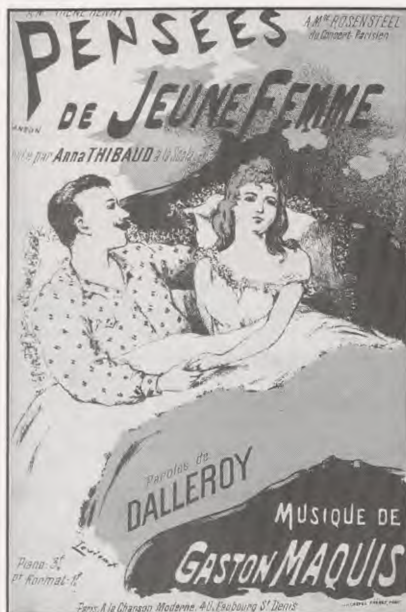
For this reason, the songs preserved in this collection are not all sentiment and charm. They also address real social concerns. One of the most eloquent examples of this social resonance is the theme of the tramp, which expresses the 19th century fascination — and fear — of marginal people. It is fascinating to analyse the songs which treat the theme of the vagabond, because they provide an extraordinarily accurate register of the ambivalent feelings that these rootless figures exerted upon the French bourgeoisie. On the one hand, the tramp represented an enviable philosophic freedom-in-poverty, divested of all the restraints of polite bourgeois society. On the other, he represented the unpredictable and the dangerous, because he was not subjected to that process of close observation and classification by which respectable people observed, understood and categorised the people in the world around them.

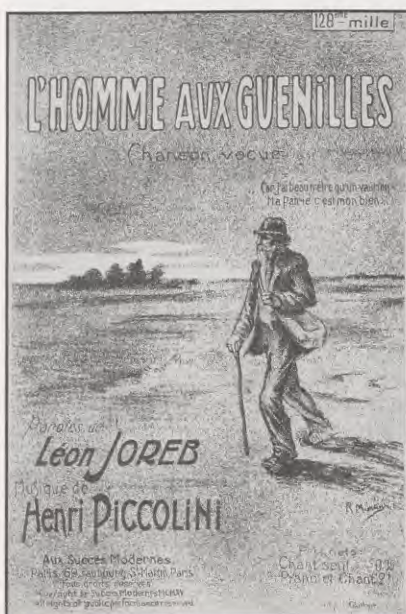
Eugène Poncin's *Les Chemineux* ("The Wanderers"), for example, is dedicated to Yvette Guilbert, and attempts





to emulate her style of harsh, realistic evocations of social misery. This song, which is illustrated with a number of evocative vignettes, evokes the hunger and exhaustion of a man tramping the roads in winter, and particularly his alienation when he is sent away from farm after farm; there is a sympathetic reference to the suffering of Christ on the cross. But then, almost without transition, the singer moves from an attitude of sentimental philanthropy to one of





suspicion and fear. The tramp suddenly becomes a figure of menace, and a vignette shows him lying in wait for some hapless traveller:

> And since not a single star shone through the veil of night,
>
> Holding a cudgel in his knotty fist ... he watches...
>
> May God save you from a chance encounter with him.
>
> He is a tramp!

This fear of the marginal and the rootless poor was a recurrent theme, but it tended to take different forms in response to new anxieties and preoccupations. Another song, Léon Joreb's *L'Homme aux Guenilles,* ("The Man Dressed in Rags") registers the French fear, after 1870, of their powerful neighbour, Prussia. The song similarly evokes the pathetic figure of a gaunt, tattered man endlessly wandering the roads, and reviews the rich array of derogatory words — "rôdeur", "vaurien", "un sans foyer, un sans famille" — with which respectable society stigmatises the homeless. Rapidly moving from one situation to another, the singer first evokes how some villagers shoot the tramp simply because he took some cherries from a tree. Then, with equal rapidity, the singer imagines the tramp wandering some dark roads near the border, where spies from Prussia accost him and offer him a reward for giving information about the paths leading into France. Will the man's social and psychological alienation lead him to betray the people who had treated him "like a dog"? He valiantly refuses, saying:

> I might just be a vagrant,
>
> But my homeland is everything I have got.

These are just two of many songs which record the impact of the enormous social changes — and the sense of growing class conflict — that were occurring in 19th century France.

These songs also serve to register other profound changes, notably those occurring in gender roles. Many of these forgotten singers were women, and they were not averse to writing provocative lyrics commenting on issues of sexuality and gender. Angélina Lamy, for example, performed a song called *L'Impôt sur les Célibataires. Marseillaise Féminine* ("A Tax on Bachelors. A Feminine National Anthem"). On the surface, this comic song just seems to be a delightful piece of mischief:

> Oh bearded sex, which forms the ugliest half of human kind,
>
> The moment has come to break the chains of cruel laws that bind us.
>
> Rise up, mademoiselles, and declare war on bachelors.
>
> Off to war! Off to war! Lift the banner of revolt!
>
> Everything is useful, but alone in all of Nature
>
> The bachelor serves no purpose at all.

She continues helpfully:

> See the Turk, in his harem full of jealous passions.
>
> This worthy child of Allah gives happiness to his sixty wives each day...

While the prejudice against *les vieux garçons* might be an old one, it assumes new resonance in the France of the late 19th century, when both government officials and the general public became concerned about the phenomenon they called "denatality". In the tense atmosphere of the "armed peace" before the outbreak of war in 1914, France's population growth slackened seriously, whilst that of Germany increased dramatically, leading to fears that France would simply not have enough young soldiers when war began, and would again be defeated by the nation that had inflicted such a humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. The French national obsession with population growth led to serious official campaigns to improve the quality of infant care, by introducing such measures as infant health clinics where free sterilised milk was distributed.

These songs also reflect changing sexual moralities. Some of them are the traditional sorts of warnings about the dangers of loose behaviour: Luce Bailly's *Regrets de Femme* is the sad little monologue of a working class girl who bemoans the consequences of ignoring her parents' admonitions about lovers; Mme. Judic's *Le Péché* ("The Sin") tells a similar story from the point of view of a village girl, although she is decidedly less repentant. But Stéphany's *Sous les Charmilles* evokes sexuality with real sensual abandon: the lyrics evoke the irresistible impulse to physcal love, which is charmingly illustrated with a frontispiece depicting five couples kissing amidst foliage:

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At the local festival, see the youth of the country,

Making their way through the evening dusk,

Behind bushes and copses.

Ah my goodness! Sometimes, at the hour of the shepherdess,

The sound of a big kiss even rings out.

In some cases, these singers surprise us by the extent to which they take their commentary on sexual matters. We do, in the end, expect the popular song to be pleasant, and yet Anna Thibuad's *Pensées de Jeune Femme* ("The Thoughts of a Young Woman") is startlingly acerbic in dispelling male preconceptions of women's sexual experience. The cover illustration depicts a young woman in bed on the night of her honeymoon, and makes it clear that she is thinking distractedly of other things. The lyrics must have shocked some contemporaries, because they describe how a woman can be left indifferent by the "egotistical" and "brutal" caresses of a man, who generally cares only for his own pleasure.

Here, in the Robert Brécy Collection, we find nearly all the great 19th century issues of class, nationality, gender and morality writ small — but very vividly — in the medium of the popular song. The presence of the collection here in Melbourne will provide some magnificent opportunities for innovative scholarship and study. ▮

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A Baillieu Remembers the Baillieu

BY **Anne Cordner**

The Baillieu Library is named after William Lawrence Baillieu (1859–1936). His brother, Edward Lloyd Baillieu (known all his life as "Prince"), on his deathbed in 1939 told his nephew that "everything the Baillieu family has they owe to your Uncle Willie". Prince, "in memory of William", then left a substantial portion of his estate to the University of Melbourne Library so that a new central library could be built.

William left school at the age of 14 and began work at the Queenscliff branch of the Bank of Victoria. He went on to become a resilient and prominent businessman. He was elected to the Victorian Legislative Assembly as an independent in 1901 and served as the minister for Health and Public Works (1909–1912). His business interests included real estate and mining (he was chairman of North Broken Hill Ltd from 1926 to 1931) and for a time he enjoyed his reputation as the "money king" of Australia. William continued his business and political activities until his retirement in 1932.

Prince was a talented businessman and was passionate about horse racing. He was also known for his generous interests in welfare and education, and his generosity was characterised by his bequest to the University Library.

My father, Harry Baillieu, was the second of the eight children of William Lawrence Baillieu. My grandfather, a tall and handsome man, was a favourite with his grandchildren. I was six years old when, in 1936, he returned to England where he died four years later. William's younger brother, my (great) Uncle Prince, who left a legacy to the Melbourne University in honour of my grandfather, was also a most handsome and kindly man who never married but who always took a lively interest in the younger members of the ever growing families of his brothers and sisters.

I enrolled in the University of Melbourne Faculty of Arts in 1944 to study modern languages under Professor Chisholm and Dr Lodewycks. This course included modern history and Latin and inevitably required extensive use of the Library resources. Although situated most picturesquely in the historic quadrangle the Library was well known to be seriously inadequate. There was limited seating and the books required were frequently unavailable. Purchasing the books was often the only alternative for us.

A very different scene awaited when I returned a quarter of a century later to study for a postgraduate diploma in social studies. What a surprise and thrill it was for me when I sought out the Baillieu Library and on entering found the familiar face of my grandfather looking down on me and greeting the throngs of hurrying, worrying, sauntering, laughing students pressing towards the reception desk. It was a comforting moment on a first day, which I have to admit was daunting.

It took me six years to complete my course — undertaken part time because I still had children at primary school and delayed for 18 months by a riding accident. As a result two of my children had joined me on campus and they shared with me the pride of seeing their