

# GREAT OCEAN WALK

## Walk Victoria's Icons

### INTERPRETIVE NOTES

#### **LA TROBE**

*The Great Ocean Walk follows the route first blazed by Port Phillip District Superintendent Charles Joseph La Trobe in March 1846.*

*In August of the year before, in the western approaches of Bass Strait, what is still Australia's worst peacetime shipwreck had occurred on the west coast of King Island.*

*The lack of lighthouses in this sector of these waters was the principle reason for the terrible loss of life – 399 of 408. Those passengers and crew persons had drowned over a period of three days as the enormous seas that assail this low rocky coast swept over the fatally stranded emigrant vessel half a kilometre from shore.*

*If this long promised lighthouse was to be built at Cape Otway it was necessary for the site to be surveyed and a report prepared as to ease of access and supply for what was very delicate machinery – as well as all the workmen and building materials.*

*Governor Gipps directed C.J. La Trobe to obtain answers to these questions and as speedily as possible. He could not have chosen a better qualified man for the task.*

*C.J. La Trobe possessed a passionate interest in science, literature and the rights of the individual. He had grown up in London, coming from a French-Swiss family with Moravian Church heritage.*

*The La Trobes and their circle of friends that filled their home for debates and concerts were instrumental, to take just one case, in the establishment of the Anti-Slavery Movement – William Wilberforce was a family friend.*

*Not your average Colonial Administrator, C.J. La Trobe even before he arrived in the fledgling colony of Victoria, had published four popular books on his "rambles" in North America, Mexico and much of Switzerland and northern Italy.*

*He had walked and ridden by horse from the east coast of the USA to the west coast in 1833. Prior to leaving for his Antipodean assignment in Port Phillip he had completed a two year assignment in the West Indies compiling a major report on the educational needs of the recently liberated slaves.*

*La Trobe found a colony bereft of any institutions of learning and debate. He was aged 38 when he took up office as the first Superintendent of the Port Phillip District of NSW in October, 1839. His Swiss wife Sophie and their young children accompanied him.*

*Before he left in 1853 he had established Melbourne University and the Melbourne Public Library. Through that decade and a half he had more than his fair share of disagreement with the settlers – often over land and taxing to pay for institutions that were viewed by most as not a very high priority.*

*La Trobe reported to Governor Gipps in Sydney. He resided in the "kit" prefabricated residence in the inner East Melbourne suburb of Jolimont, a name chosen by Sophie La Trobe and where they had honeymooned near Neuchatel in Switzerland.*

*This is the man that accepted the direction to find a "practicable route" to Cape Otway. The Otways and other spectacular parts of Victoria presented a delicious mix of challenge and distraction from the tedious affairs of state for Latrobe.*

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*He made numerous excursions to nearly all corners of what would become known in 1851, with separation from NSW, as Victoria.*

*When visiting mission stations, settlers' holdings, town hall meetings, land disputes, La Trobe's powers of observation shone through in his writings and superb pen and ink washes or quick pencil sketches.*

*La Trobe was intimately involved in endeavours to protect the native peoples with only limited success. He was under resourced and sometimes, it has to be admitted, indecisive.*

*This inability to halt the slow decline of the health and morale of the District's original inhabitants troubled him greatly. The Buntingdale Mission at Birregurra in the foothills of the Otways was a place he regularly visited, especially when journeying to Warrnambool or the Otway Coast as he was in 1845 and 1846.*

*Six years into his appointment emigrant ships were sailing regularly direct for Port Phillip. There was a shortage of shepherds and other skilled agricultural workers that had to be overcome.*

*And so it was the Melbourne bound *Cataraqui* became the terrible statistic previously cited. The furore over the loss of life saw the House of Commons in London calling for the Secretary of State for the Colonies to resign. The NSW Legislative Council was not surprisingly condemned by the Colonial Secretary for not building lighthouses in Bass Strait.*

*So down the chain of command came the direction to La Trobe and he was equal to the challenge of establishing a practical route to Cape Otway – engaging Henry Allan from Allansford near Warrnambool and Aboriginal guides. After three attempts over five months La Trobe was successful.*

*A belated knighthood conferred in 1865 was some small recognition by his colonial masters for the founding role he played in the Colony of Victoria. He died in England in 1875 and is buried beside his beloved Sophie.*

*He would be pleased to know that every day a fresh crop of "fellow rambles" are discovering the delights of the coast he first saw in 1846 and remembered for the rest of his days.*

*You could do worse than drink a toast to this urbane and erudite "colonial administrator" as you spend a night at a campsite along this coast and hear the roar of the mighty Southern Ocean that enraptured Charles Joseph La Trobe.*

### Prepared by Donald Walker

Donald Walker is the author of "Beacons of Hope" – a history of the Cape Otway and King Island Lighthouses at the western entrance to Bass Strait. This work sets out the story of the rugged Otway Coast that the Great Ocean Walk now follows - its shipwrecks and settlements, its explorers and peoples. A practicing architect he continues to draw inspiration for his work in the Otways from the high ranges mist filled gullies as well as the cliff rimmed bays and the bold headlands the coast is known for.

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