



## Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

### George Victor Le Vaux: An Adventurer in Rural Queensland

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#### Abstract

Often in the past, historians tended to study and write mainly about key figures, such as rulers or very famous people. However, in recent decades, historians have started to focus on local figures who had a role in their community. This paper narrates the life of one of those characters, an interesting individual who led a varied and interesting life with a strong connection to rural Australia. This man was George Victor Le Vaux, a Canadian educator whose life had numerous different facets and interesting twists. The idea that prompted the writing of this article was Le Vaux's connection to Italy and its unification, but also the fact that a complete account of his life had never been attempted. The methodology used was an historical analysis of the available sources and an investigation of the education sector in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Queensland. Therefore, the aim of the study is to provide an account, as accurate as possible, of Le Vaux's life and his thoughts and ideas on education.

**Keywords:** George Victor Le Vaux, rural Queensland, history of education, cadets, Freemasons

#### Introduction

A soldier, a teacher, a writer and an adventurer. Those are not four different people, but one man who lived a pretty intense and varied life. His name was George Victor Le Vaux. Adventurer, however, is probably the best word to describe him, due to the many experiences he had, some of which resemble closely the ones of fictional characters in adventure books. Le Vaux represents one of those forgotten individuals active in pre-federation Australia, one of the people who migrated to Australia and left their mark, not only in education, but in an Australia that was becoming a modern nation.

Researching about Le Vaux was not an easy task, and I am sure much more information about his life is still waiting to be found. Several regional Australian newspaper articles cite him, and these, alongside his publicly available articles and writings, represent valuable means to try to understand his life and the times in which he lived. Although at first glance Le Vaux appears to be just a teacher by trade, his adventurous life allowed him to become a man ahead of his time. Looking at his life story can hopefully provide insight into his impact in rural Australian society and he may even be inspiration for our daily lives.

In the next paragraphs, I will highlight how writing was one of the main interests of this versatile man. Thanks to this passion of his, today his articles on educational matters describe his ideas and suggestions – such as his position on corporal punishment and the role of the teacher in the community – which would have been embraced only decades after his time. He shows a clear

picture of his stances as an educator, helping us to comprehensively understand the complexities of his character.

### **Education in Australia During the Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

Before diving into Le Vaux's life story, I will provide some background of the situation of education in Australia, to better understand the context in which he operated. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Australia went through a debate regarding education. In 1872, Victoria saw the birth of a movement to make education free, compulsory and secular in public schools, followed by Queensland in 1875, New South Wales in 1880, Tasmania in 1885, and Western Australia in 1895 (Clark, 1986). In early 20<sup>th</sup> century Australia, teaching represented a means of social mobility, especially for women, due to an above-average starting salary.

A very common educational tool in that era was the pupil–teacher teaching system, which entailed that a young prospective teacher would teach during the day, supervised by an inspector, and study in the evening (Macintyre, 2012, pp. 49–50). In those years, pupil–teacher teaching was widespread, characterising a large portion of the teaching staff. This allowed schools to try to reduce the number of students, who were often of mixed ages, in classrooms (Macintyre, 2012, p. 60). Women represented the majority of teachers, and this was also the case at Indooroopilly State School in Queensland, where all the teachers and pupil–teachers were female, in the period from 1889 to 1898 when Le Vaux was the headmaster (Fredline, 1989, p. 3).

### **Le Vaux's Early Years and Military Experience**

Le Vaux was born in Manchester, United Kingdom, on May 8, 1842, but England was just the starting point of his journey. When he was in his late teenage years, he joined Giuseppe Garibaldi's army in his campaign for the unification of Italy. Between the late 1850s and early 1860s, Le Vaux served in the 5<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the Hunters of the Alps (in Italian: Quinto Reggimento Cacciatori delle Alpi); he fought many battles, among these the ones in Palermo and Volturno, both fought in 1860 (Vaugh, 2016).

However, a problem comes up just by looking at his tombstone, where the battles in which he fought are listed. Alongside other battles, La Scala stands out since it is not a battle of Italian unification nor a battle in general. The sources in regard to the La Scala battle all cite Le Vaux's tombstone as a reference, and this appears to be the only source for this event (Fredline, 1989, p. 3; Vaugh, 2016). So, it might as well be that La Scala is just a typo or an error that somehow ended up on Le Vaux's tombstone. The only connection between La Scala and the Italian unification process is that the La Scala theatre in Milan, one of the most famous in Europe and in the world, hosted operas by composers including Giuseppe Verdi and Gioachino Rossini, who reinvigorated the Italian nationalist spirit and also acted as catalysts for patriotic ideas (Sorba, 2012, pp. 533–549). The presence of La Scala in the inscription on Le Vaux's tombstone is a mystery that it is still unsolved. In 1860, Le Vaux was only 18, but there were many young volunteers among Garibaldi's troops.

After his experience in Italy, and probably on the wave of his experience as a volunteer under Garibaldi, Le Vaux moved to Canada, where he graduated from the Military College in Toronto in 1867 ("Cemetery Plays Major Role," 2014, pp. 2–3). The passion for military life, its role in society and as an educational tool can be seen in his successive endeavours, as we will see, with the creation of a cadet corps in two of the schools in which he worked. The military aspect in Le Vaux's life co-existed with his professional one and did not undermine his passion for education and writing. For example, that same year he wrote a book in which he explored the topic of creation in the Bible and in science (Le Vaux, 1867). Education and military discipline appear to be two of the strong beliefs of Le Vaux. These draw from his early life experiences and would have influenced his career as an educator.

## Le Vaux as Scholar, Author and Teacher in Rural Queensland

Le Vaux was principally an educator with teaching experience in Canada, the United States and Australia. Education was also the theme of his second book, *The Science and Art of Teaching: Or the Principles and Practice of Education*, published in 1875. Australia, especially rural Australia, can be considered as a second home to Le Vaux. He was invited to Queensland by the then Premier McIlwraith (Fredline, 1989, p. 3). Queensland in the 1880s was experiencing a period of development and migrant policies which promoted the arrival of migrants from different parts of the world, making Queensland an attractive destination at the time, alongside the United States and Canada (Johnston, 1988, pp. 408–411). We can imagine Le Vaux being attracted by the opportunities Queensland had to offer at the time.

However, another possibility could have been that his decision to move to Australia was linked to the fact that, in 1877, Le Vaux was suspended from his position as a public-school teacher by the Board of Education, according to statements that appeared in a Canadian publication (British Columbia Legislative Assembly, 1879, p. 184). This suspension might be one of the reasons why Le Vaux moved to Australia. The first position he held “down under” was that of science master at Belmore School in Sydney. Subsequently, Le Vaux’s first appointment in Queensland was the role of head teacher in Roma, where he founded the school cadets, which represented the first cadets in state schools in Queensland (Fredline, 1989, p. 3).

The cadet corps must have been very important to Le Vaux’s idea of education; on one occasion, he personally asked the commander of Fort Lytton to include his Roma cadets in one of the fort’s drills, which at that time were meant just for officers. He also highlighted the educational importance of the trip between Roma and Brisbane (“Roma Cadet Corps,” 1888, p. 2). Roma State School was a co-educational institution in Le Vaux’s time. Boys and girls were separated only in 1889, which was the last year Le Vaux was headmaster (Harper, 1986, p. 10). The school did not have a strong educational continuity in its first years, and the curriculum consisted basically of just the famous 3 Rs (reading, [w]riting and ’rithmetic). Le Vaux was the school’s fifth headteacher, and he worked there for ten years from 1879 to 1889 (Harper, 1986, p. 23).

After several years of teaching in Roma, he became the first headmaster of the school in Indooroopilly, which opened on July 8, 1889. In this school, he founded another fine cadet corps (Fredline, 1989, p. 4). The Roma and Indooroopilly Cadet Corps were among the first corps not only in Queensland but in Australia as well. They were formed as the result of the withdrawal of colonial troops, and also due to the winds of war from Europe (Stockings, 2007).

While teaching, Le Vaux kept writing and produced several essays and writings in many different subjects, with education being his main topic. He also authored many different articles, for example one about Canada’s geography (Le Vaux, 1869, pp. 222–227). Le Vaux is described as a scholar, author and teacher who “*would be an acquisition to any high school in this state*” (Editorial Department, 1878, p. 58). He had experience in England, and his ideas on school-law amendments had attracted much attention. A school principal wrote: “*any city in need of an active superintendent or an able principal of schools, can find such a one in Prof. Le Vaux*” (Editorial Department, 1878, p. 58).

### Contribution to Education

Le Vaux’s views as teacher can be seen in his writings. He goes into detail about what school management is, what is expected by teachers, and a deep analysis of what and how subjects should be taught at school (Le Vaux, 1875a). In his written works, he provides examples and guidelines for teachers, emerging with a role as educator of educators. He states that teachers should think of themselves as parents of all their students and should treat them as if they were their own children (Le Vaux, 1872a, p. 6). Furthermore, he goes into detail about relationships

among teachers, and in a way, he advocates for equality among teachers of different sex. He said:

*It has often been remarked to the writer that lady teachers are generally deficient in that professional enthusiasm which we regard as essential to success. But after a varied and prolonged experience in the Public and Collegiate schools of this and other countries, we feel bound to say that some of the most enthusiastic and accomplished teachers we have ever known were ladies, and some of the most indifferent were men. In truth, professional apathy is common to both sexes. (Le Vaux, 1875b, p. 175)*

Le Vaux seemed to be far ahead of his time also with regards to corporal punishment. While not being totally against it, he advocated for its use as a last resort, and not as a universal means to solve all educational issues, as it was used at the time. He also provided a series of guidelines on how educators should not display the rod to instil terror in students and argued for a study of students' behaviour. The frequent use of this means by teachers was seen unfavourably by Le Vaux (1872b) as he argued that pupils do better if they are less exposed to corporal punishment (p. 460).

Religion was also one of the aspects that Le Vaux wrote about. In this regard, *The Pacific School and Home Journal* of 1878 represents a source to better understand him and his ideas. In the journal, Le Vaux authored several opinion pieces (see Le Vaux, 1878a, 1878b, 1878c), the first of which was about the origins of religions and their places of worship, and he provided an anthropological analysis on how religions developed, with a focus on Central America, Europe and the Middle East (Le Vaux, 1878a, pp. 41–43).

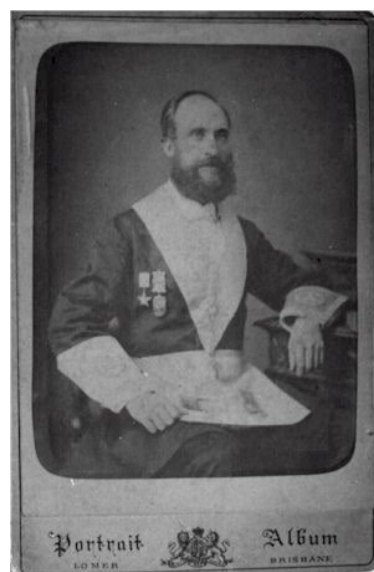
Religion and different cultures appear to be among Le Vaux's interests as it can also be seen in another article in which he narrated the story of the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl (Le Vaux, 1876). In another article in the 1878 issue of *The Pacific School and Home Journal*, Le Vaux also advocated for more connections between teachers with the possible creation of local teacher associations which would also send their members to the State Convention of Teachers (Anderson, 1878, pp. 44–45). In the journal it is stated that Le Vaux was residing in Nevada County in California. In another article, he highlighted the importance of education, and he complained about teachers' and headmasters' low wages in the United States, and how their employment was only for the term, which left these professionals to find a job, often a menial one, between terms (Le Vaux, 1878b, pp. 123–126). In the last article that he wrote for the issue, Le Vaux voiced his concerns about education in the United States, and how other countries such as Canada and Australia were more advanced on school organisation and the role of teachers. Le Vaux pointed out that in Australia teachers were civil servants and he praised its young but very efficient education system (Le Vaux, 1878c, pp. 169–171). Moreover, he said that in the United States the training for teachers was very short, especially when compared with the Australian one, which required years of study and in-class supervised teaching to obtain a teacher qualification.

Overall, Le Vaux pointed out the unpreparedness, but also the shortage, of teachers in the US. He also cited figures to back up his claims: one teacher to every 100–114 pupils, versus one to every 70 in Australia, one to every 30 in England, one to every 50 in Canada, and one to every 65 in New Zealand. Plus, he reported that this was coupled with the problem in the United States of having mixed classes of children of different sexes, ages, grades and abilities. The journal showed Le Vaux's deep understanding of education and his interest in teachers' rights, and that he was not afraid to state his opinion.

But if all that I described before were not enough, while researching Le Vaux's views on education, a photo of him in Freemason uniform caught my eye. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Freemasonry was spreading in Australia, especially in Queensland, alongside other social organisations that had brotherhood at their core that supplemented, or altogether substituted, traditional beliefs (Kingston, 2009, p. 89). Le Vaux embraced Freemasonry actively and his name

appears a few times in Freemason literature. He was active in Freemasonry in Queensland from at least 1883 (“Australia,” 1883, p. 513; “Queensland Maranoa Lodge,” 1888, p. 489). During his stay in Queensland, he was active in Brisbane’s Freemason Lodge, as records show that Le Vaux was a Freemason serving as Grand Director of Ceremonies from 1885–1886 in the Grand Lodge of Queensland (“The craft abroad,” 1885, p. 261). His involvement as a Freemason did not end there, as he was also a member of the Raphael Lodge of Roma, where he served as secretary in 1896 (“The craft abroad,” 1896, p. 4). In 1880, he was the Worshipful Master of the same lodge, a senior officer in charge of the lodge’s business and a figure who oversaw all ceremonies and rituals (“Raphael Lodge,” 1880, p. 2). Freemasonry, being a closed organisation, limits the scope of the research of Le Vaux’s accomplishments in this association, but from what is publicly accessible, one can deduce that he had a truly active role.

Le Vaux lived for several years in rural Queensland, not only in Roma but also in Toowoomba. He rests at the Toowoomba-Drayton Cemetery, where he was brought after his death in East Brisbane in 1913 (Queensland Government, 1913).



**Figure 1: George Victor Le Vaux in his Freemason uniform.** Photo courtesy of Doug Vaughn, [www.vaughn.co.uk](http://www.vaughn.co.uk)

## Conclusion

With a lifetime that spanned three continents, campaigns to unify Italy, Freemasonry, a career as teacher and headmaster in schools around the world, Le Vaux surely was a remarkable man, not just for his adventurous spirit, but also because of his dedication to impacting and changing the society of his time. Rural Australia truly became an important part of his life. His contribution to pre-federation Australia, in the education sector, and being the founder of cadet corps in Queensland, which are still active today, were very important steps for his time. Le Vaux embraced the spirit of rural Australia, in which he probably saw uniqueness and opportunities that could not be found anywhere else. He travelled three continents in a time in which people did not travel much.

Le Vaux had several different roles, and he surely had a strong impact on many lives and on several communities in which he lived. Especially remarkable is his influence on rural education, with the introduction of teaching methods and practices that were surely ahead of their time. Moreover, he had a pivotal role in the creation and development of school cadets in Queensland. Rural Australia played a great part in his life, and he surely left a mark on the lives of many

students. Nonetheless, Le Vaux's life story seemed to have slipped through the cracks of history, until now. I hope it may prove inspiring to many.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Mr Doug Vaugh, a descendent of G. V. Le Vaux, for granting permission to use his website as a source. It offers documentation that would not be otherwise retrievable. I thank him for the valuable information about his ancestor that can be found at <http://www.vaugh.co.uk>

Also, I would like to thank the Toowoomba Historical Society, which was the starting point of my interest in this complex figure.

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