

Super Bug, Rumour and Truth: On Writing a Memoir/Biography of Count Geoffrey Potocki de Montalk

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In the early sixties, as an eighteen-year-old second-year student nurse at Wellington Hospital, I had my first experience of the operating theatre when I was assigned to a chest operation – specifically a segmental resection of a lung.

I was to ‘circulate’. That is, act as a sort of unsterile messenger or runner, and handler of discarded swabs which I was to remove from a bucket and hook up for counting. As the thoracotomy got under way, I hovered anxiously at the edge of the operating room hoping that I wouldn’t be called on to do anything. But the chest had barely been opened when the surgeon suddenly said: ‘Nurse de Montalk!’ and looked at me over the top of his mask.

‘Yes?’ I said nervously.

There was a pause in which the suction slurped and instruments passed hands.

‘Any relation of Ken de Montalk?’

‘Yes, he’s my father.’

‘Oh,’ said the surgeon. ‘He and I were at school together.’

There was another pause, during which the Tudor Edwards rib spreader was deployed.

‘Nurse de Montalk,’ he continued.

‘Yes?’ I said warily.

‘I suppose that means you’re related to – the Count?’

This was a question which was, and still is today, the response of people – once mostly of my parents’ generation, now, in the wake of the Count’s last years in New Zealand, also my contemporaries – to the name de Montalk.

It is a question which sometimes carries an unpleasant tone, although happily not in the case of the surgeon. People will say: ‘The Count – the dreadful Count Geoffrey. Of course he was quite mad – the long hair,

the robes. He was a rampant fascist you know. Pagan. Sent to prison. A poetaster. No wonder the family disowned him.' It was this pattern, together with the photographs of a man in a cloak and robes which I first saw as a teenager, and continued to encounter from time to time in the press, and my mother exclaiming when she was cross with me, 'You're just like the Count!', that alerted me to my father's cousin, caused me to spend a good deal of my life wondering about him, and to spend eighteen months writing his biography.

I first met Geoffrey Potocki de Montalk in 1968, in France, when I was 23 and he was 65. My husband (John Miller) and I were travelling and camping in Europe and, as Draguignan, the town in which Potocki lived, was close to the French Riviera where we were planning to spend a few days, we decided to detour inland and meet him. I knew as much about Potocki then as most people know today. I knew that he was born in Auckland in 1903, that since about the age of eight he had believed he was a poet by divine right, and that, much to the consternation of his family, he had rejected careers in teaching and the law (for both of which he had studied intermittently) in order to pursue his calling as a poet. I knew that he had felt stifled in 1920s New Zealand and, dismayed by the country's dislike of difference – poets in particular – had deserted a wife and small child to live in England and Europe, to 'follow the golden road to Samarkand'. I had heard about his robes, his long hair, his paganism, his habit of sunbathing naked; I knew of his private printing press, his pamphleteering, and his claim to the throne of Poland. And there was his obscenity trial in London in 1932 on a charge of uttering and publishing an obscene libel in the form of three short bawdy verses and two well-known translations of similarly ribald poetry by Rabelais and Verlaine. (In fact, he had simply shown a manuscript of the poems to a typesetter).

As a teenager, I had been especially intrigued by the obscenity trial, which had resulted in a verdict of guilty, and a six-month sentence in Wormwood Scrubs prison. Indeed, I had taken the trouble to read about the trial in Alec Craig's *The Banned Books of England*,¹ which I had found in the Wellington Public Library. Somewhat strangely, looking back, my interest in the trial – described by C.H. Rolf in *Books in the Dock*² as 'the most extra-ordinary trial of the century' – was not so much in the content of the poems (which were not reproduced in Alec Craig's book, and with which no one I knew then, or indeed now, was familiar), but in Potocki's irreverence and flamboyance in court. He appeared in his cloak, refused to take the oath, swore by Apollo, jostled with the judge. There was also the 'criminally brutal' nature of his six-month sentence, as W.B. Yeats described it, and the array of literary heavyweights who contributed to his unsuccessful appeal: Yeats, Leonard and Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot, Aldous Huxley,

H.G. Wells, J.B. Priestley, to name a few. I was further aware, on a more concerning note, of his support for Germany during the Second World War – my father, who left New Zealand with the First Echelon, and fought in Greece and North Africa, regarded him as a traitor – and of what were spoken of in contemptuous tones as his ‘pro-fascist activities’.

It seemed to me that he was a heady combination for a man born and raised in colonial New Zealand. Later I was to learn that he had been imprisoned twice during the war on charges which arose out of the British government’s concern about the right-wing stance of his private press – the press which published his literary and political journal the *Right Review*, undertook printing commissions on behalf of the British Union of Fascists, distributed material, censored in the British press to Poles living in London and, most notably in 1943, exposed the massacre in 1940 of over 15,000 Polish officers and citizens by Britain’s ally Russia in the woods at Katyn. I was also to learn that additional government attempts to silence him had resulted in the theft of his press and confinement in an agricultural labour camp in Northumberland.

On meeting Potocki in Draguignan, John and I were somewhat surprised. We found him to be handsome, hospitable, charming and, apart from a tendency to talk on, unexpectedly reasonable and amusing company. I noted in my diary at the time – and sent an aerogramme to the same effect to my parents – that it appeared people took him more seriously than he did himself.

We corresponded. The letters from his end were lively, and John and I were intrigued by his political dissidence and frequently amused by both his wit and his scintillating unpleasantness where his so-called enemies and detractors were concerned. We became very familiar with his royalist and right-wing preoccupations, his hatred of communism, his disdain for ‘modern formal religions’, his contempt for anything English and left-wing, and his impatience with what he perceived to be shallow intellectualism or literary pretension. We also became familiar with his devotion to poetry and his claim that, following his obscenity trial and imprisonment in 1932, his work had been, and still was, boycotted by the mainstream literary establishment for reasons of its puritanism and his politics.

Although we were familiar with these preoccupations, we didn’t fully understand them. They were delivered by post, as they had been in conversation in Draguignan, without context, without explanation, as if we also had been immersed in his political and literary intrigues. Occasionally there was an anti-Semitic remark. Here we squirmed, and passed on. He’s eccentric, we told ourselves, and therefore extreme. A provocateur. ‘Opposed’, in his own words, in his pamphlet entitled *A New Dorset Worthy*,³ ‘to every line of thought triumphant at the moment’: Christianity, communism,

democracy – even the decimal system and modern men’s clothes. The letters were often accompanied by booklets and tracts from his MéliSSa Press: poetry, translations, political, genealogical and biographical pamphlets – publications which, like his correspondence, sometimes made little sense without a wider understanding of his life.

My dominant impression of Potocki during the fifteen years we corresponded, and later from 1983, when he returned to New Zealand at the age of eighty to spend ten years living between summers in New Zealand and France, was one of vast knowledge, energy and humour. And an obsession with his past. An obsession which seemed to be principally related to his 1932 obscenity trial and his non-recognition as a literary figure. He spent a good deal of time with us when he was in New Zealand. Although he eventually based himself in a bedsitter in Hamilton, beneath the house of a friend, he found our house in Kelburn, close to the cable car and city, convenient. He would visit frequently for weeks, even months, at a time. He began to intrigue me. I recorded interviews with him, made a documentary for television, continued to probe his colourful past. As I got to know him better, I began to sense that, beyond the monologues, the mythologising and the provocative point of view, there was a more complex person than I had previously imagined. I also began to realise the extent to which he was surrounded by preconception, rumour and half-truth. For a long time, however, I made no firm attempt to resolve his life: I had made the documentary, I had other things to do. Indeed, the possibility of writing about Potocki’s life did not occur to me until after his death in 1997, at which time John and I, as his trustees and executors, took charge of his archive. And even then I wouldn’t start writing until December 2001. As it happened, the archive itself stopped me from writing.

My somewhat troubled association with the archive started in 1996, the year before Potocki died, when John and I visited him at the Villa Vigoni in Provence. At the time of our visit, Potocki, then ninety-three, frail and confused, was being well cared for by a neighbour. But his archive, which we found scattered in damp rooms beneath his bedroom, was mouldering away. The villa had been repeatedly broken into during Potocki’s final years, and the contents of the rooms he referred to as the Archive, Bindery and Printery, had been up-ended and thrown about. Windows and doors had been smashed, and remained so; rain, vines, and rodents had entered; and there were files and escaped papers everywhere, many trodden into the dirt of the semi-sealed floor. As his trustees it was clearly our responsibility to rescue the archive and then, when the time came, to repatriate it to New Zealand. With our time in Draguignan limited to a few days, we hastily piled as much as we could into boxes, placing them in storage. When, some months later, Potocki was hospitalised, permanently, we sent for it.

The shipment, which arrived in April 1997, soon after Potocki had died, consisted of forty-two large cartons of dishevelled, dirty, and often mouldy papers and publications littered with dust and rust-coloured earth, dead insects and strange congealed cobwebs. Rusty staples and paper clips were very much in evidence, and some papers, wet when packed, were still clumped and damp. Many papers had been gnawed, sometimes severely, by mice, and were stained with their urine. One promising bundle of letters had absolutely no centre: words, thousands of words, had been daintily nibbled away, layer on layer, as far as the margins of each page.

It was my task, as the co-executor and trustee not then in paid employment, to make a list of the archive's contents. The prospect of cleaning and organising this mess in order to make an inventory was daunting. For most of 1997 I sat on a groundsheet on the floor of a small room I had rented in the city, opened the travel-battered cartons, and, like the 'Ozymandias' traveller from 'an antique land', looked upon their contents and despaired. I had set myself what I thought was a realistic target – a carton a week cleaned, sorted and listed on the computer – but the volume of the material, and the unpleasantness of the task, meant that my modest deadline became increasingly difficult to meet. I looked for reasons to stop. I wrote poetry on the computer, amused myself entering any irresistible or particularly important details I came across onto a screen marked 'Biography' – just in case I decided to write about Potocki (or the archive went up in smoke). One entry reads: 'I give up. Let's just say assorted stationery, papers and publications. Nothing that seems to be of earth shattering importance!' Another simply states: 'Brown paper bag containing dirty – as in earth dirt – postcards'. Frequently, I sat with my back against the wall and wondered whether I should give up and leave everything in storage to fester.

Fester became the operative word that year. Every six weeks I was breaking out in a boil, or an abscess – on the back, on the shoulder, on the hip, but most frequently on an eyelid. And the lid infections weren't just styes. They were huge affairs which caused the whole side of the face to redden and swell, and on one occasion necessitated the intervention of an eye surgeon, who, when I reported for follow-up with my face back to normal, said he had thought I would never look the same again.

Unaware that the archive might be involved, my GP went through the usual procedures: swabs from family members to see if someone might be a staphylococcus carrier (all negative), and antibiotics – unhelpful in terms of halting the course of the infection, but necessary to prevent it spreading, entering the orbit (bony cavity containing the eyeball) and from there moving into the brain. The staphylococcus was eventually found to be one of the super strain, resistant to penicillin (which I was prescribed fruitlessly for some

months) although thankfully, sensitive to almost everything else, including erythromycin, which I swallowed regularly for the rest of the year.

Incredibly, it never occurred to me that the papers might be the problem. I knew nothing about archival work, or the handling of manuscripts. Certainly I wore gloves from time to time, but only because the papers were dirty. And I only wore them for short periods because they were inconvenient when typing, and added to the general unpleasantness of the job. It wasn't until the end of the year, when a casual remark from a friend made me wonder about the archive, that I called up the National Library, Te Papa, even wrote to a manuscripts conservator in Sydney, to ask about the possibility of fumigating the papers. I was told fumigation wasn't an option. The conservator, however, unaware of the size of the archive, did suggest placing each page in a plastic cover!

I inquired further about taking precautions. An archivist from the National Library checked out the five boxes I had yet to unpack, spotted some mould, and then offered me the use of the Hygiene Room at the library when it next became available. I stopped working on the papers, and the infections ceased. Some months later, in mid-1998, I completed the job in safety: gowned, gloved, masked and working on a convenient bench beneath a perspex hood and dust buster, with wash basin and tea-tree oil at hand (the Internet had told me that methicillin resistant staphylococcus was sensitive to tea-tree oil).

Relieved to be free from infection, I started to think about what I had found in the archive, and to wonder again whether I should write about Potocki's life; whether I should risk re-visiting the papers. For although the condition and volume of the material had been discouraging, much of its content had been fascinating. Potocki was not only a biographer's nightmare, he was also a dream. There was a life-time's correspondence: carbon and non-carbon copies of all his own letters, most of them typed; the originals of many letters sent to Potocki, by people such as Douglas Glass, Walter d'Arcy Cresswell, the Duke of Bedford, Henry Miller, Aldous Huxley, Richard Aldington, Colin Jordan, Kenneth Hopkins, George Hann. There were originals of Hopkins's 'Grasshopper Broadsheet'; poetry manuscripts of the early New Zealand poet, Maxwell Rudd; Mason's Penny Broadsheet; previously unpublished letters from and poems by A.R.D. Fairburn; Fairburn's 'On A Bachelor Bishop', signed, 1938; woodcuts by George Hann. There were genealogies, newspaper clippings, autobiographical manuscripts and publications from his *Mélissa* and other presses, including flyers, leaflets, pamphlets, journals, booklets, dummy booklets, poems for the Feast of Saturn. There were briefs detailing his many legal altercations. I found copies of a poem printed on cards cut from toilet paper packets; an envelope intriguingly labelled 'Girls 1943-44';

a file relating to censorship issues, Sir Ernest Wild and ‘disgraceful happenings’.

But I had already discovered that there was more to the archive than its contents. There was its ambience. I had found that, handling it in its still warm, unsorted state, I had been aware of a sense of Potocki no taped interviews, visits to libraries, nor even the clear lines of every day contact, could provide. I had discovered the strange intimacy of being the first one to delve into the boxes of a person’s life. The sense that you’re taking that life unawares, that instinctive connections are starting to form, that you are becoming close to, or familiar with the life in ways you weren’t aware of before.

Still I did nothing. Then, one Sunday morning as I was sitting at breakfast, browsing through the *Sunday Star Times*, I wondered aloud whether I should revisit the archive the following Monday. Minutes later I was interested to read that a bacterium was thought to be the cause of the curse of Tutankhamen’s Tomb. And then, almost immediately, as I turned the page, I felt the familiar piercing of the eyelid that preceded the old infection. I hadn’t been near that archive for six months.

Face already swelling, I rushed to the after-hours clinic. ‘If it’s like this now’, said the doctor, looking at the eye, ‘I’d hate to see it tomorrow.’ I told him about the archive. He told me about the plague pits in London and the fates of those who had fossicked about in the basements of houses that had been built over them. ‘How is it that my husband hasn’t been affected?’ I asked. He said he supposed that my immune system ‘didn’t know the bug was a nasty’, and was taking time to respond to it. ‘But I had no problems before I mentioned the possibility of writing a biography’, I said.

I was spooked. He could understand why. I’m not superstitious, but I did begin to wonder – probably because I needed a reason – if there was a metaphysical dimension involved. Whether Potocki was sending me a message. He believed in magic – the infinite power of nature, the magic power of words. Was he keeping me away from his archive? And if so, why? Was he worried his colourful life would be lost in a conventional biography? Burdened by detail? Or was he concerned about the time it would take to write? All that scholarship and methodology?

Or, did he know I still had to find a voice? Was he acknowledging the importance of waiting for a voice before beginning to write? Australian writer Robert Dessaix stresses the importance of waiting. For the artist, says Dessaix, knowledge comes last, and the voice comes first. One needs to sit and *wait* for something to make a connection in order to find that particular voice. Was the ambience of the archive, and the waiting it was imposing, to be the source of my voice?

Again, I delayed. I worked on a collection of poetry instead. Then, after a year, I began to wonder about a more personal, less detailed biography. About staying away from the archive and working from my documentary research, and the details that I had already lifted from the archive and stored on the computer – details conveniently restricted by the process of rapid selection that the condition of archive had imposed on me – and from Potocki's own writing, of which I had a significant collection. I also began to wonder about working from my own knowledge of Potocki, from my own diaries, memories and impressions and those of my family. Was a memoir the way to go? But I kept coming back to biography: memoir could only encompass the years I had known him, and I hadn't met him until he was sixty-five. There was also autobiography to consider: should I allow Potocki his own voice – to comment from his correspondence, interviews, and writing, as if looking over my shoulder?

In November 1999 I signed up for Victoria's MA in creative writing for the following year and I needed a subject for my portfolio or thesis. Something on Potocki seemed the obvious answer. But in what form? A novel, an epic poem, or a film script sequence from his life – his trial perhaps? Or, what for the past three years had seemed impossible a biographical account of his life?

I approached the account of Potocki's life with considerable apprehension. Aside from the usual decisions which need to be made about a biography (the culling and organisation of research materials, who to put in, what to leave out) and the challenge of completing the project in less than a year, there was still the question of my voice – or, the problem of genre – to settle.

As I collated my research and put the first tentative words on paper, I began looking at anything headed biography, autobiography, and memoir. I found an essay on biography in *Blue Pastures*, by Mary Oliver.⁴ The essay began somewhat alarmingly by stating that 'Biographers, of all writers, have need of prayers, and answered prayers'. 'The graceful angles,' Oliver writes, 'and situations of clean prose may finally be chiselled from the language, but what of the material itself? How can the biographer know when enough is known, and know with sufficient certainty? What about secrets, what about errors, and what about the small black holes where there is nothing at all? What about the wranglings among minor characters, the withholding of facts for thoughtful and not-so-thoughtful reasons – or their mishandling – and this not even in the present but in the past, hidden in letters, in remembered conversations, in reams of papers? And what about the waywardness of life itself – the proclivity toward randomness – the sudden meaningless uplift of wind that tosses out one sheet of paper and keeps another? What about the moment that speaks worlds, as the saying goes, but in the middle of the

night, and into deaf ears, and so is never heard, or heard of? . . . I would not be a biographer for all the tea in China.’

In consideration of autobiography – for clearly the relationship between the three genres was close – I found another piece, by Andrew Rissik, in the *Guardian Weekly* (6-12 January 2000) which gave me cause for thought. It was on ‘what the best autobiography has in common with good poetry’. Rissik believed that ‘good autobiography . . . has an inner, magnifying sense of the significance of individual perception, of attitude’. He was speaking of a poetry not primarily of language, ‘but of content, of convincingly transmuted personal experience’, and, it seemed to me, of a need to make some sense of the world, or an event, or subject. Reviewing Al Alvarez’s autobiography *Where Did It All Go Right?*, Rissik found that there was no spiritual answer to the title’s question: ‘As the story unfolds, we miss the moment-to-moment, interfusing extremes of bleakness and joy in the texture of the writing, that poet’s sense of a mind growing, altering, as it perceives’. In terms of autobiography generally, he argued that life should not be made abstract: ‘we are put on this earth to eat, drink, talk and make love’. For the story of someone’s life to work, it needs ‘a poet’s sense of a private importance, and intelligibility in the most trivial events’.

In addition to the thesis, and a creative writing paper, I was also doing a reading paper, tailored in my case to biography and memoir. In pursuit of memoir, I turned to the first book on my list, *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, edited by William Zinsser.⁵ This book encompasses a series of talks by nine writers on the ‘pleasures and problems of writing a memoir’. A particularly memorable piece was Annie Dillard’s response to writing her memoir, *An American Childhood*, having written poetry for 15 years. ‘Other literary genres are shrinking’, she wrote in ‘To Fashion a Text’. ‘Poetry has purified itself right out of the ballpark. Literary fiction is scarcely being published . . . The short story is to some extent going the way of poetry, limiting its subject matter to such narrow surfaces that it can’t handle the things that most engage our hearts and minds. But literary non-fiction is all over the map . . . There’s nothing you can’t do with it . . . non-fiction prose can also carry meaning in its structures and, like poetry, can tolerate all sorts of figurative language, as well as alliteration and even rhyme. The range of rhythms in prose is larger and grander than it is in poetry, and it can handle discursive ideas and plain information as well as character and story. It can do everything. I felt as though I had switched from a single reed instrument to a full orchestra.’ It was this passage by Dillard which convinced me that I should approach Potocki’s life with a hybrid in mind: a combination biography and memoir, with perhaps, a small sense of autobiography. The boundaries of writing about a life, it suddenly seemed, could be as wide as one wanted them to be.

Having decided to put myself in the story, issues of content and structure now became dwarfed by the question of point of view, and the extent to which the story should be personal and subjective. What *of my involvement?* Eileen Simpson, who discusses her memoir *Poets in my Youth* in *Inventing the Truth*, spoke to me here. She told me that her first draft was a ‘near disaster’. That it was wooden because she wasn’t in the book enough. Because she had left out her take on it. Her editor had told her: ‘You have to tell us what you thought and what you felt’, and so she began to write ‘as the older woman’ she now was. She warned: ‘It’s an easy trap for a memoir writer to fall into. You’re trying to reconstruct something that happened when you were much more unformed, but as an artist you have to be true to the older and wiser person you have become.’

Russell Baker, who wrote *Growing Up*, was also helpful. Writing in *Inventing the Truth* about why his memoir didn’t work the first time, he explained that ‘it was really nothing but journalism – reminiscences of today about yesterday’; that tension between the main characters was necessary. This seemed to suggest that placing myself alongside Potocki in a subjective as well as an objective role, and challenging that subjective role, could actually be helpful. Zinsser himself spoke of the subjective, selective and ultimately ‘unreliable’ nature of memory. And of the concept of remembered truth – its difference, person to person; the fact that it is, after all, ‘the only truth a memoir writer can work with’. This was particularly helpful because the question of the symbiosis of the objective fact of biography, and the personal fact, or the ‘remembered truth’, of memoir had begun to bother me. And there was the complicated issue of the various truths as they are remembered – Potocki’s remembered truth, my remembered truth, the remembered truths of others – and all filtered through my distance as a biographer, and my closeness as a memoir-writing cousin.

It occurred to me that truth, as it related to Potocki, was particularly vexed and incomplete. As Professor Rod Cave, formerly of Victoria University, who knew and wrote about Potocki, wondered, why if there are so many good stories about Potocki, do so many questions remain unanswered, and why had nothing of any depth appeared in print? Well, for one thing, Potocki’s life was extraordinarily full and confusing. And what he had recorded had been done so in disorganised snatches. Because of this, and because Potocki himself could be prickly, no one had set the record straight. There was no clear path. As I had found when researching and scripting the documentary, this was not a life easily isolated and conveyed. For another, Potocki, right-wing and anti-democratic, was most assuredly not politically correct. As Greig Fleming writes in the preface to *Aristo, Confessions of Count Geoffrey Potocki de Montalk*,⁶ he was ‘out of synch with Official Time, and inconvenient for Official Space . . . his papers are decidedly not

in order!’ Fleming concludes that Potocki ‘was tossed in the Literary and Political “Too Hard” baskets’.

Furthermore, because he courted controversy, Potocki was, and is, surrounded by rumour, by stories which have lost nothing in the telling over the years, and which, because they seem consistent with his flamboyance and often extreme points of view, have a ring of truth about them. Stories which I nevertheless frequently found wilted in the face of documentary evidence. Even basic facts about Potocki have been confused over the years. For instance, Lauris Edmond, in *The Letters of A.R.D. Fairburn*⁷ and *An Autobiography*⁸ has him born in 1896, leaving for England with Douglas Glass, and walking the streets of London in a white toga. In fact, Potocki was born in 1903, arrived in London well after Douglas Glass, and the so-called toga was only ever a crimson cloak or robe. Margaret Scott’s remembered encounters with Potocki in Provence, recounted in *Recollecting Mansfield*⁹, among a number of confusions, have him tall in a black robe, and living in a wooden cottage with a number of dogs. In fact, the Villa Vigoni was stone, and Potocki, who was not tall, and whose robes were not, as already stated, black, hated dogs – the only domestic animals living in the villa at the time were Siamese cats! Then there were the ways in which truth varied depending on one’s personal experience of Potocki. As a polemicist, he polarised people. Those who pressed his negative buttons, and to whom he was appallingly or unnecessarily rude, quite reasonably described him as unbalanced or mad. Those to whom he had merely been amusingly unpleasant referred to his wit. Others found him to be charming, considerate, amusing and mild.

Robert Dessaix, who spoke to the MA participants at the very time I was wrestling with the complicated issue of truth, had some pertinent things to say. He spoke of human truth versus fact, and stressed the importance of evoking the shape – or what I understood to be the sense – of truth, as well as its fact and detail. I related to this, for while I could confirm many of Potocki’s ‘truths’, I also knew that without my ‘take’ on Potocki, as Eileen Simpson had described it – without my asking and answering why – and without the ‘shape’ of truth Dessaix spoke of, the story of Potocki’s unusual and provocative life would be flat and dry.

Fact and detail were easy to deal with. But how to find and convey the shape of truth? And did shape have anything to do with insight? With asking why? I found a clue in an essay in a book on my list entitled *Practising History*,¹⁰ by historian Barbara Tuchman. Tuchman said: ‘To find out what happened is enough at the outset, without trying too soon to make sure of the “why”’. She believes ‘it is safer to leave the “why” alone’ until after the facts have been gathered, arranged in sequences, then ‘in sentences, paragraphs and chapters’. In her experience, the ‘very process of transforming

a collection of facts . . . into a narrative eventually forces the “why” to the surface’. She goes on: ‘It will emerge of itself one fine day from the story of what happened. It will suddenly appear and tap one on the shoulder, but not if one chases after it first, *before* one knows what happened. Then it will elude one forever.’

This process of the historian submitting herself to her material instead of trying to impose herself on the material was an important revelation. Insights I had never had before, even at close quarters with Potocki, prompted in some instances by the brooding ambience of the archive, really did start tapping my shoulder as I drew all the material together. In this connection, Tuchman also recommended research on the spot. She liked to see and obtain a feeling from the actual location. To visit the scene before writing, she wrote, is to start business with money in the bank: ‘On the terrain motives become clear’. Again, I related to this. Having spent time at the Villa Vigoni, for instance, having absorbed ‘the terrain’, I already knew that no photograph could have conveyed the dual sense of dusty isolation and sunny self-sufficiency I had found there.

Tuchman had other encouraging things to say, both in terms of truth and personal point of view. She wrote of the importance of historians being passionate about their subjects, and was of the view that biographies written by ‘friends, relatives, or colleagues – which are really personal memoirs’, have tended to work best over the years. In this sense it seemed personal knowledge of the small moments of a subject’s life – the way they ate, or walked, or used their voice – was also useful in evoking the shape of truth. Thinking about the subject’s voice, it occurred to me that using the voice itself – Potocki’s voice – directly in interview, and remembered conversations (as well as in correspondence and writing) could also be helpful.

As to other ways in which the shape of truth might be found and conveyed, Toni Morrison’s views on imagination were of special interest. Morrison – who recorded the truth of black American slave history as fiction in *Beloved* – speaking in ‘The Site of Memory’ (*Inventing the Truth*) of the unwritten, interior lives of the people she wrote about, observed that only ‘an act of imagination’ gave her total access to these lives. This made me realise that, relying on my knowledge and understanding of Potocki, I could perhaps give some shape to his unwritten life – to the insights or whys which were not tapping me on the shoulder. And to the places he went to in his mind, particularly in extreme old age, as he lay alone in the villa, day after day, no radio or ringing telephone, no conversation, no longer a desire to read, the room dim by day, dark early. His life shaded by trees, submerged by vines.

Most of the truths, or conclusions, I reached about Potocki are not readily explained in a short essay. His life doesn't lend itself to snapshots and, as I have just laid down more than a few thousand hours and 120,000 words working through it, I won't attempt to deal with either here. I can however summarise what I found overall. I found that Potocki was irreversibly affected by traumas experienced in childhood; that his life is yet another example of the extent to which, to use a cliché, the child really is father of the man.

I also found, perhaps not surprisingly, that his obscenity trial and imprisonment – or, more accurately the injustices associated with these events – was the further defining time in his life. Some might argue otherwise. They might say that, given his developing eccentricity, the trial and its outcome was simply one incident on a course that was already set; that it only accelerated the inevitable. But I don't believe this to have been the case. While it is my view that his eccentricity – released by leaving New Zealand – would have stayed with him, it is also my view that events surrounding his trial and imprisonment, following the injustices of his childhood, as he perceived them, gave rise to a hard-edged disillusionment and defiance, a distrust of so-called British justice, a hatred of the English that may not otherwise have developed.

More immediately, and also in summary, he was a man with a capacity for playing a large number of roles, passionately. He was, in the manner of eccentrics, as described by a major ten-year Edinburgh study into eccentricity, nonconforming, opinionated, outspoken, not in need of the reassurance or reinforcement of society and convinced he was right and the rest of the world was out of step. He was also, of course a count – a title which, given his descent from one of Poland's foremost aristocratic houses, he was entitled to use – although not, in the view of some, including the New Zealand branch of the de Montalk family, in the Antipodes. He was: an amorist and, if letters in his archive are anything to go by, much admired by women (in response to suggestions that he was chauvinistic, I should say that the letters in his archive from and to his admirers indicate otherwise); a man who was unashamedly sexual; an admirer of ancient civilisations; an intensely spiritual man who worshipped old gods, in particular, Apollo, and despised what he saw as the puritanism, hypocrisy and restraint of modern formal religions; an astrologer who, convinced of the infinity of nature, ordered his life by serious study of the stars; a monarchist who believed in the Divine Right of Kings and distrusted democracy, which he described as a hypocritical system for flouting the wishes of the people, and believed should be replaced by a ruling monarchy with a plebiscite; a claimant of the Polish throne – a claim which he pursued in a spectacular and often light-hearted fashion, and which, given Poland's history of elective

monarchy from within the ranks of nobles, together with an ancestral connection to the House of Piast – one of the ruling dynasties of Poland – was, although fanciful, not overwhelmingly without foundation.

I also found him to be: an uneven poet; a talented translator, pamphleteer and writer of incisive prose; a prolific printer who, in response to censorship and his perceived post-trial literary oblivion, was driven by a need to be heard; and a fascist who in fact was not enamoured of fascism (which he described as a very bad form of government, being as it is based on demagogy), but which he saw as a lesser evil than bolshevism and an antidote to communism. Apropos of fascism, he was certainly pro-German during the war, although to fully understand Potocki's response to World War Two one needs to understand not only 1000 years of Polish history in relation to the respective roles played by Russia and Germany, particularly Russia, but also the part his hatred of England, initiated by his imprisonment, played in his thinking. His anti-Semitism was also complicated – which is not to excuse his unpalatable point of view, rather to acknowledge his complex response and my duty as a biographer to investigate his views.

Recently, in the space of a single week, I had three strong and typically different responses to mention of Potocki, the sorts of responses I imagine will to some extent dictate reaction to the story of his life. A relative referred to him as a 'nutter'. An Aucklander, who once met him briefly, remembered him as a 'dreadful man', evicted for anti-Semitic remarks at a party in Auckland, and recalled by an acquaintance, with whom he once stayed, as descending to breakfast wearing his robes and a crown and wanting to be waited on. A Wellingtonian, who encountered him from time to time, described him as 'an outstanding character', 'a prose writer with a capital W'. 'No New Zealand writer has matched his penetrating insight', I was told, 'New Zealanders have lacked the breadth to appreciate him.'

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