

A CONVERSATION WITH WALLACE KIRSOP

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Preliminary Note

Wallace Kirsop is one of Australia's most eminent scholars in French Studies and in book-trade history. For much of his career, he taught at Monash University, where he has also been Director of the Centre for the Book. He was editor of the *Australian Journal of French Studies* from 1968 until 2002, and, with occasional short breaks, edited *Explorations* from its first number in 1985 until his retirement from the position in 2008. He has made numerous personal contributions to *Explorations*, and continues to work in the field of French-Australian relations.

Colin Nettelbeck, who has recently retired from the A.R. Chisholm Chair of French in the University of Melbourne, is one of the founders of *ISFAR* and currently serves on the Advisory Board of *Explorations*.

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CN I thought, Wal, that we would talk about your association with *Explorations* today, but before that, by way of context, perhaps we could talk about your wider interest in French-Australian relations. You have been involved for a very long time: I wonder if you might tell us something of how that came to be, what your interests have been, and what ongoing work you might have in the field.

WK Well, it's certainly not something that comes from any sort of family connection. Some people in the field have that as a background to their interest, but as far as I know, there are no French ancestors amongst my various convict forebears! There were half a dozen of my direct ancestors living in New South Wales before 1801... They came from various parts of the British Isles. So it wasn't that. I guess it's because, having studied French in school, and then at university—and obviously I've been involved in all this for more than 60 years now—French things struck me; I had a curiosity about names, connections, and so forth. And then, various contacts, quite early in my research in France... For example, I was brought into contact with the French Protestant world, because

I was working on a sixteenth-century author, and one of the places you do things when you work on the sixteenth-century is the Société de l'histoire du protestantisme français: 54, rue des Saints-Pères. You go to the library there. And eventually I joined the society, so I've been getting their bulletin for fifty years now, I suppose. Monash has a complete set, which is rather rare. So I've been aware of the Protestant connection.

Later, working on the late eighteenth century, on Court de Gébelin, there were documents I wanted to look at in the library of the Huguenot Society in London. This would have been thirty years ago, and I went there to work on these things and they said: 'Well, you can't use the library without paying a fee or becoming a member of the society.' So I thought, well, I'll become a member of the society, which is one of these grand British societies where all the members are Fellows. I paid a life subscription, so I've been getting their publications ever since—not their quarto series which you now have to pay for separately, but the annual proceedings; and I have access to the library, when all I needed to see were a few letters, in fact. So I've had that connection, and then, just a few years ago, when the Huguenot Society was set up in Australia, in Sydney, and they were organising a branch in Melbourne, I got dragged into that. I've stepped off the committee, but I'm involved in that as well.

So that's one end, but over the years, I came to recognise all the other connections: the First World War brides who came back to Australia, and of course some of the people I studied with in Sydney had that sort of background, Franco-Australian families... And then there were all the people from the Channel Islands, whose French was a long way further back. The odd persons who had a French background... part of that very individualistic emigration from France to Australia, which happened from early on. The wool-buying families: some of them were around. Remember Ray Lamérand, who was one member of one of those families, and who taught at Monash for a while. So there were all sorts of connections I was aware of, and curious about, I suppose, because I was studying French. So it all grew from there.

Later, when I was starting to work on the history of the Australian book trade, I was interested in connections with European countries as well as with Britain and the United States, and France was one of the places from which books were

brought in. The German connection was more important in nineteenth-century Australia, but one discovers that in the general culture of nineteenth-century Australia—it's been brought home to me quite recently, because I've been working through a couple of years of *The Australasian* 1888–1889, frequently *The Australasian* reviewed new books in French. The articles are in English, but they are based on French-version texts of interest... and this reflects a much wider and deeper interest in France in late nineteenth century Australia, or at least in the elite parts of Australian society, than one finds now. People were in fact very well informed, and there's quite a bit of evidence. There were Supreme Court judges who bought French novels to read at leisure... I have sometimes said, rather wickedly, that people knew more about French literature in the nineteenth century, before the language was effectively taught in the universities, than we do now, when we have that position in universities, however challenged it may be. So all of that is part of the background that made me interested in participating in the work that ISFAR was starting a quarter of a century ago.

CN You have yourself, since then, done some specific historical work, haven't you?

WK Well, yes, on aspects of this, especially on the book trade. But it was partly when I was editing the journal, which was intended to cover the field. It has not always been easy to get people to contribute, so you write fillers to fill in, and many of them in my case have had a book trade aspect. There has also been reviewing books—and obviously Ed Duyker has had a valuable role there... And there are other things that need doing. I haven't got into the French voyages thing, except that I was asked, back in the 80s, when the Academy was preparing its work on Baudin (which was published as *Baudin in Australian Waters*), to review the bibliographical chapter. That was essentially a copy-editing job, I suppose, but it did involve looking at various things. We found that Monash had acquired one or two prospectuses for the 1820s second edition of the account of the voyages, things which hadn't been published before. We—that is, Pat Gray and I—published them in *Explorations*. So there was that little thing, and then, later still, I got interested in certain aspects of the official accounts of the d'Entrecasteaux voyage: technical aspects of the way the books were got out. I've been collecting material, and I gave a paper

years ago, but I haven't actually written it up yet. But again, it's marginal to the main effort, if you like, because I'm well aware that there are quite a lot of colleagues who are working in this area, which is one of the most important aspects of the interaction between the Australian continent and France, early on in the history of European settlement here, and even before. So I have been very much a bit player in that aspect, but I've tried to do more substantial things in some of the book-trade topics. Pat Gray's MA thesis, which I supervised, was one of those things.

CN Can you remind us of Pat Gray's thesis?

WK It was about the presence of French books in Australian libraries, personal and institutional, in the nineteenth century. It hasn't really been written up, but it's there as an MA thesis at Monash. So that was one aspect as well of this interconnection, and again backing up the notion that, by and large, if there was one foreign language apart from the classics that well-educated people knew in nineteenth-century Australia, it was French. It shows up in places that can sometimes seem surprising. The interest of David Scott Mitchell, for example, in French: the fact that he had Baudelaire and Stendhal in his library, essentially as reading texts and not as objects of collections, is a very interesting comment on Mitchell. Reading Baudelaire and Stendhal in the 1870s and 1880s is a mark of very advanced taste.

CN There are a number of those literary connections, aren't there: Christopher Brennan¹ for example.

WK Yes, well that's another thing I should mention, because it ties in with the book history theme. I came across Brennan's annotated books quite early, in 1961. I came back from Europe having worked on a sixteenth-, early seventeenth-century topic for my doctorate, interested in exploring what materials were available in Australia to continue work in that field. Well, not a huge amount, in fact, but it led me to look around in libraries for holdings of sixteenth and seventeenth-century books, not just in Sydney, but in Melbourne, and quite quickly, in Adelaide as well. But in the course of looking at materials in some of the residential colleges of the University of Sydney, I came across Brennan's library—a large part of which, not all of it, was held at St John's

College, the Catholic college. It was there because Herbert Moran had taken over the mortgage for Brennan's library after he [Brennan] was sacked from the University of Sydney in 1925. He put the classical books, to which Brennan still wanted access, in the library at St John's College, and held onto most of the others. Now a lot of the others eventually went, through his son, Patrick, who was a professor at the ANU, into the ANU library. Except some of the very choice Mallarmé items, which we subsequently discovered had been given to Patrick Moran's college at Cambridge, St John's College. The really choice Mallarmé things are there: that's something that one of Lloyd Austin's pupils discovered around thirty years ago... Anyway, I came into contact with Brennan's books, and started a study of the annotations, not only in the French books—some of which were also in the State Library of New South Wales, because they had found their way to John Quinn, the parliamentary librarian, and from there to the State Library. Others of the Quinn books were in St Patrick's College in Manly, the seminary of the archdiocese of Sydney. This was quite interesting, because when I first visited St Patrick's College, just before—literally two days before—coming down to Monash in 1962, I was taken over the library by Mgr Veech,² who was the librarian, and he was quite happy to show me the 'forbidden' books: Jansenist, protestant material, on open shelves. In fact, I remember him opening a volume, and a letter fluttered out, and he picked it up from the floor, and said: 'Oh, this is a letter from Pius IX to Archbishop Vaughan.' And he just popped it back in the volume and put it back on the shelf. But anyway, there was another, locked, glass case, and he said: 'Oh, that's John Quinn's books, given by his sisters to St Patrick's.' And Veech, who had a doctorate from Louvain, knew perfectly well that it was mostly rather dubious late nineteenth-century literature, and he wasn't offering to open the case at all! Subsequently, the library was rearranged, probably after Veech died, and the things were put on the open shelves, but by that stage, the postulants couldn't read French any more, so it didn't really matter... Then, that part of the library was itself sold—sadly before I realised—to a French bookseller in New South Wales. We managed to buy some of the things for Monash, because I'd done a serious study of it with Robin Marsden, and I knew exactly which books had been through Brennan's hands, because they had his annotations, his underlinings and sidelinings... So I was able to pick up a few things for Monash, but the ones that were signed, the bookseller recognised, and he sold them off in other places. Anyway, that's another part

of Brennan's library. It's accompanied me all these years. And it's still around: Robin and I and Kathy Barnes (whom I reviewed recently in *Explorations*) hope to get together to finish off some work that was thought of a long time ago, to catalogue Brennan's annotated books. But it's become a very fashionable study—it wasn't so fashionable half a century ago. I look with some amusement on all the people in the northern hemisphere who are reinventing the wheel. It doesn't always pay to invent things in Australia, because people don't believe that it has happened here.

CN Thanks for all that, Wal. I'm sure that there are many aspects of it that could be developed further. We have the eighteenth-century journeys of discovery, we have the nineteenth-century cultured classes being very familiar with what was happening in French literature, we've got things like the wool trade developing, the wine growers and so on in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. We've got World War I... Now, in respect to *Explorations*, although my memory of its original aims are a bit nebulous, I like to think of it as a place where these French-Australian connections of various kinds can receive some kind of testimony as a field. It is still a field that, while not unexplored, is explored very unevenly... I wonder if you could tell us something of what you think about *Explorations*, in the light of the twenty-odd years that you edited it?

WK Well, I took it on, I guess, partly as a sort of adjunct to *AJFS* (*Australian Journal of French Studies*), because we were using the same people to produce it, up to the time I stepped down. Meredith [Sherlock] came into it a little later: she started working for *AJFS* in 1992, and *Explorations* had been going for a while then. And then there was the period when I found trying to cope with both was getting too much, and Colin Thornton-Smith took over. When Colin had his health problems, I came back... And so it was an adjunct, and unfortunately it always had to come second to *AJFS*. We got terribly behind with *AJFS*, and it became important to keep up to date, and that was the highest priority. And then later, in the second round, the activities of the Centre for the Book became the highest priority, and we had to fit *Explorations* in. And then again, partly, there was a dearth of copy at various moments. I guess my sense of what ought to happen grew over time as well. I was interested, and I still believe it's something that ought to be done—colleagues perhaps were less

concerned about it—I think that one of the things that should be coming out of ISFAR in the longer term is a sort of biographical dictionary of people in the French-Australian field. But it's long slow work, and you've got to get people who are working on certain topics to contribute articles of reasonable length to put the thing together. Maybe it'll happen one of these days, but it needs somebody with the energy and the focus to put it together. One hopes that one or other of the younger colleagues will take that on... One of the problems always was the relationship between a journal that was academic and refereed, and a journal of general interest. Now my view on the whole was that the general interest should probably predominate; in other words, that one should be happy to have articles from people who had done family history studies—of French families who had come here in the nineteenth century or later—and so on, with a story to tell. Whereas there were other views... Perhaps there weren't the same pressures for academics to score DEST points³ or whatever they're called these days, and perhaps I could afford to be indifferent, because I was publishing things in other places. Anyway, my career was approaching its end, and I didn't need that sort of brownie point... I was struck by the fact that *Italian Historical Studies* went on-line a year or so ago. I think that some of their subscribers still like to have the hard copy, as I certainly do: I managed to get the last one (which is the first one for this year) in hard copy. But they have a statement about how they do things, which I'll read out for the record, but *Italian Historical Studies* is produced for a general readership: 'Preference will be given to articles which increase an understanding of the history of Italian immigrants and their descendants. The editors of the journal accept unsolicited articles; however it reserves the right to decline publication. We welcome articles from professional and amateur historians and writers. All items submitted are subject to editing.' Now it's that sentence—'All items submitted are subject to editing'—which holds the clue as to the way in which they do things. In other words, they do get academic things of a good standard, but at the same time they get reminiscences of a descendant of a wine-grower, or a green-grocer from Footscray or whatever. Whatever form it comes in, they tidy it up and they make it readable, enjoyable. Now I think there is a place for things like that, and there's even a role for academics to write things like that. But the pressure is to have things count, and to be footnoted, and all the rest of it... I think towards the end of my tenure, *Explorations* had a mixed approach. There were those tensions, but I think overall we were a fairly broad church.

We haven't got a very large subscriber base, and I'm worried that the subscriber base is ageing; so it's obviously important to be able to recruit younger people. How that's done is one of the problems for the present editors to think about, I guess. So that was the basis...

But then, one had to make sure that whenever one heard of somebody doing something, one went to that person and said: 'How about doing something for *Explorations*?' Now in some cases, it might be a summary of a much more extensive piece of work that was going to be published as a monograph, or as a long article in a more up-market journal, in research terms. Fine—that posed no problems for me. But I think we have encouraged a certain amount of writing and publication in the area, and of course, by the book reviews, we've drawn attention to what is really quite an amazing amount of material that comes out: family history things are part of a general movement, and they pop up all over the place, and you often don't hear about them unless they get recorded in something like *Explorations*. But then, all the other aspects: the considerable literature, obviously, on the French voyages of discovery around the Australian coasts, but all sorts of other things as well...

It would be nice to throw more emphasis on some of the parallel things, and that requires work. One of the things I've wanted to study is French immigration to the United States, for example, to delve into studies and interviews with people, and so on, because I think one needs to know that one's not working alone, and that there are parallels and comparisons that are possible. I've been re-reading this book by Joseph Amato, *Rethinking Home: a Case for Writing Local History*. Now Amato works on Minnesota, and he's had a position as Professor of Rural and Regional Studies at Southwest State University, so basically he's been able to make a career in this offbeat sort of place. But having started working on French political thought in the nineteenth century, he's well aware of French things as well. They quote some of his books on the blurb: '*Dust: a History of the Small and the Invisible* (California 2000); *Bypass: a Memoir* (2000); *Golf Beats Us All So We Love It* (1997); *The Decline of Rural Minnesota* (1993); *The Great Jerusalem Artichoke Circus: The Buying and Selling of the American Rural Dream* (1993); *Victims and Values: A History and Theory of Suffering* (1993); and a forthcoming history of walking'... He's a very offbeat historian, but very bright and very well-informed. Local history

and regional history tend to have a bad press, but as a bibliographer and book historian, I can sympathise, because one works with small things, not with ‘la petite histoire’ in the derogatory sense of gossip about nothing at all, but recognition that small things, properly interpreted, and properly set in their context, lead you to larger questions. And that’s how he does local history. His reading takes him into geography and ecology, and social history and all sorts of other things, the history of immigration, and so on...

CN One of the things that has left me, not exactly disappointed, but unsatisfied about the way *Explorations* has unfolded is that we haven’t been able to publish big chunks. I remember John White’s history of the Lhuillier family, for instance, which was a piece of amateur family history, but contained a lot of interesting material. I think of Stan Scott’s⁴ book on Chisholm.⁵ I still dream of there being a more extended publication series through ISFAR, but it doesn’t seem very realistic.

WK Maybe all it needs is a reasonable grant to set it up. These days you can produce e-books—though they’re not very satisfying, and indeed, even to the members of the general public they’re rather poor examples of book production most of the time, and often very expensive—but that is a possibility, and then print on demand for those who want to have the hard copy. And if you’ve got access to reasonably cheap setting, which maybe can come from amateurs, as more and more people acquire the skills to do these things, maybe it could work. If somebody gives you a solid seeding grant at the beginning, then it may be possible to keep the ball rolling. You just have to sell enough of each title to get back enough to keep the grant in place. It’s not impossible. Ken Dutton,⁶ with the Hartley program,⁷ has been able to do things up there, but of course the terms of the gift were tied in fairly tightly to the University of Newcastle. But maybe that’s an angle that needs to be thought about as a way of going forward—apart from encouraging students—as they are now being encouraged by some colleagues—to do postgraduate work on relevant topics.

CN We did have a few successes, with the stuff on the nuclear testing and the cinema conference for instance.

WK Yes, well they're topical and there's a clear public interest, and that's important. The historical things are harder, but that's why they need to be followed up.

CN I think of the work of Jean Rosemberg.⁸

WK Yes, that's been a long on-going thing. We did some work on that, but things will need to be revised again. I think we should look to somebody coming up with some money to set up a fund.

CN What would you think of as being the high points of the *Explorations* story for you?

WK Obviously we had some early numbers on the initial conference that started ISFAR going. That produced a range of things from people like Miles Lewis and others on various topics that were relevant and stimulating. But I just think that from time to time we've had something interesting that's come our way, or something we've been able to chase. And of course the business with the consuls was important. And it's not all finished. I've still got some stuff. Colin Thornton-Smith wrote up the Alliance and Maistre⁹ story from what was here, but I've got photocopies of Maistre's dossier in Paris, and I want to write that up. It's interesting, very interesting indeed, because the structure of the personal consular files, with the purely official part, with the reports they sent, and then the other part where you see all their recommendations, and you see where they stand, and whose backing they had. Poor old Maistre didn't have many unfortunately, unlike Biard d'Aunet,¹⁰ who was pretty well backed up. I remember the exchange between two prominent ministers or parliamentarians, where one reminds the other that Biard's sister is Étincelle of the *Figaro*, and to be careful, that he has access to organs of power in France—despite the fact that he was clearly a very difficult character, and that the further away from Paris he was the better they liked him. So there was that. And then there were all the complaints: I published the letter to the President [of the Republic] from Mme Henry¹¹ complaining that Biard was not supporting her efforts for French culture in Sydney in the 1890s: she writes to Félix Faure, the thing is sent to Foreign Affairs for investigation, and then an official hand writes on it 'no action' but 'à classer'. In other words, all the complaints are there forever, and

your secrets follow you well beyond the grave... There are similar things for Maistre, and one of them—it can't have been in the things we found here—was that Maistre got a petition up in his favour, which is signed by all sorts of Melbourne luminaries: a very interesting document. I'd have to get permission to reproduce it, but it's sitting there waiting...

So there was all that consular business. It didn't lead to a great deal, immediately, as far as Castelnau¹² was concerned, but it provided the clue, incidentally, to his solicitors...

CN You haven't talked about Castelnau.

WK No, I haven't. That's still on the boil. I came to Francis de Castelnau through the fact that he made the first significant legacy to the then Melbourne Public Library in 1880. However, one moves out from book history to other questions. Allan Willingham wrote quite a lot about him for a report prior to the demolition of the house in Mordialloc, which went down a couple of years ago.

CN Where was that written?

WK It was a report for the local council, the City of Kingston. But it's obviously accessible, because I've been in touch with a man in America, who was an early student of engineering at Monash—a Master of Engineering student—whose great-great aunt may have worked for Castelnau as a servant in the 1870s. He had access to all sorts of information via Willingham's report. Allan had seen some of the stuff I had done. One of my plans is to publish a preliminary account of Castelnau, and then have Allan add something on the various buildings... One of them—perhaps the only one that survives—is a three-storey house in Drummond Street. It's called Denver Terrace. That's the last one that has a clear connection with Castelnau. But I may have to write that up through a series we have at the Centre for the Book. We've started a series on immigrant communities of readers and writers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (it's a fairly cumbersome title)... And it's there that we're going to publish the full text of the letters that Anselme Ricard sent back to Paris in the 1850s from Sydney and Melbourne—which Peter Hambly¹³

came across. It's in French, obviously, but it's too big to go in *Exploration*. I think there was a notion that a summary would be published in *Explorations*, and I'm not sure what's happening with that. Anyway, that's something we want to do through the Centre for the Book next year, and I'll probably do a Castelnau for the same series. So there are still things going on. Another one of the highlights was Colin Thornton-Smith's article on the Alliance [française du Victoria] affair.

It's clear that there is much unfinished business and that the rest of one lifetime will not suffice to deal with it. One keeps on trying... In the French-Australian field it is important to work over the detail rather than plunge into inadequately based syntheses. On the other hand—and it is Amato's essential lesson—micro-studies need to be informed by a sense of context.

Monash University — The University of Melbourne

Notes

- 1 Christopher Brennan, poet and academic, Lecturer in modern literature and later Associate Professor in German and comparative literature at the University of Sydney from 1909 to 1923.
- 2 Mgr Thomas McNevin Veech figures in Paul Crittenden's *Changing Orders: Scenes of Clerical and Academic Life*, Blackheath, N.S.W., Brandl & Schlesinger, 2008.
- 3 Assessment of a research paper by the Department of Education, Science and Training for funding purposes.
- 4 Dr S.J. Scott, a Lecturer and subsequently a Senior Lecturer in the French Department at the University of Melbourne (from the 1950s to the 1980s), is the author of an unpublished biography of A.R. Chisholm.
- 5 A.R. Chisholm, Lecturer and later Associate Professor and Professor of French at the University of Melbourne from 1921 to 1957. A.R. Chisholm was one of the first Australian scholars in French to have acquired an international reputation.
- 6 Kenneth R. Dutton, Professor of French (1969–1998) and a former Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the University of Newcastle. Professor Dutton is a frequent contributor to *Explorations* and a member of its Advisory Board.
- 7 The Hartley Bequest program of scholarships, prizes and other funding was established from Professor Kever H. Hartley's legacy to the University of

Newcastle, to encourage the study of French. K.H. Hartley was the foundation Head and subsequently the foundation Professor of French at the University of Newcastle (1955–1968).

- 8 Jean Rosemberg, French-born Melbourne author, bookseller and publisher. His publishing house, River Seine Publications, was particularly active during the 1980s.
- 9 Paul Maistre, Vice-Consul and later Consul for France in Melbourne, 1886–1898, 1901–1908.
- 10 Georges Biard d’Aunet, Consul General for France in Sydney from 1893 to 1905.
- 11 Juliette Henry, a Sydney-based teacher of French and cultural *animatrice*, for some time wife of artist Lucien Henry.
- 12 François de Castelnau, explorer and naturalist, French Consul in Melbourne between 1864 and 1880.
- 13 Dr Peter Hambly, an Adelaide-based French scholar, is a specialist in nineteenth-century French poetry.