

A FRENCH DIPLOMAT'S REFLECTIONS ON AUSTRALIA AND THE PACIFIC¹

ALBERT SALON

ON ALBERT SALON

Albert Salon and his family arrived in Australia in 1969, just a year after the 1968 Paris student revolt and its social and political aftermath. His term as Cultural Counsellor at the French Embassy in Canberra coincided in part with an exciting period in Australia's own history, namely the two terms of the Whitlam government and Australia's and New Zealand's protests against the French nuclear tests in the Pacific.

Albert Salon was arguably the most unusual and possibly the most memorable of all the French Cultural Counsellors who have served in Australia. He was memorable not only because of his achievements during a particularly difficult period in French-Australian relations (such as the foundation of the Canberra French School, the creation of the Canberra Maison de France and the establishment of the Federation of Alliances Françaises in Australia), but also because the promotion of the French language and French culture was not merely a career path for him and a job he was good at, but was and remains to this day his life's passion and his true vocation. He was a missionary for things French in this country. His predecessors and successors tended to be secondary or university teachers seconded to the post of Cultural Attaché or Counsellor: most of them were highly competent and some quite outstanding, but the posting was generally a diversion or an interlude in their main career. Albert Salon was a professional cultural envoy, possibly the only specimen of a rare species. His work as a cultural envoy provided the motivation for, and the subject of, the senior doctoral thesis (Doctorat d'État) he devoted to the propagation of French culture in the world ("L'Action culturelle de la France dans le monde"). The present writer had the privilege of attending the formal soutenance (or "defence") of this important thesis, which took ten years to research and to write up, at the Sorbonne in 1981.

¹ Translated and adapted with the author's permission from *Colas colo, Colas colère: un enfant de France contre les empires* (Paris, L'Harmattan, 2007) by Julia Fetherstonhaugh and Colin Nettelbeck.

Born at Auxerre in Burgundy in 1935, Albert Salon came from a modest family and was brought up by a devoted mother who worked in menial jobs to support her son. Albert owed his rise in life to the institutions of the Republic and more specifically to the extensive scholarship system which allowed all children and all young people to transcend disadvantage and reach the top levels of professional success and the highest echelons of society. Throughout his school and academic career Albert was supported by scholarships, a means by which the French State provides equality of opportunity. This is a gift Albert Salon never forgot and he continued to defend it and to plead for it throughout his life. Young Albert was admitted to the Auxerre Primary Teachers College, and on completion of that course he taught in a small single-teacher village primary school whilst simultaneously pursuing further studies as a part-time student. It was a hard life, not unlike that described in novels and short stories about the Third Republic. Thanks to another scholarship, Albert became a full-time university student of German language and literature. However, when his hope of being appointed a teacher was jeopardized by a bout of tuberculosis, he decided to change tack and enrol in the Institute of Political Science in Paris. He was subsequently admitted to the prestigious Ecole Nationale d'Administration, the classic track to the highest levels of public service.

Albert Salon chose to serve in the cultural section of the Quai d'Orsay, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and in the Ministry for Cooperation (the successor to the former Colonial Office). Throughout his career, with the possible exception of his last posting, he was primarily a cultural envoy either abroad or in former French colonies. He served in Bonn (in the Federal Republic of Germany), in Australia, in Quebec and in Mauritius, having also spent some years in the central administration in Paris. Albert Salon's last official posting was as Ambassador for France at Kingston, in Jamaica.

From the outset of his career Albert Salon was admirably supported by his wonderful wife, Frédérique, and in the later decades of his life also by their lovely and brilliant daughters and their much-loved adopted son from Korea.

In retirement Albert Salon has been even more active and dynamic, if this is possible, than during his formal career. The main cause he has espoused is the defence of the French language, both in France and in the world at large, against the onslaught of English as the sole language of international communication, displacing French even in France. No longer restricted by diplomatic niceties, this speaker of many languages (including

English) has become a champion of cultural and linguistic diversity, i.e. a fierce opponent of America's all-pervading monolingual influence. President and founder of two highly influential and unashamedly aggressive organizations, L'Avenir de la langue française and Forum Francophone International (France), he is an untiring fighter for the preservation and the propagation of the French language. An admirer of the ideals and the legacy of General de Gaulle (rather than a Gaullist politician), Albert Salon believes in the future of francophonie, the shared solidarity of the French-speaking community in the world. He is highly critical of the Brussels-based European Union and is determined to preserve French national sovereignty. Whether one agrees with him or not on these and other topics (including his interpretation of aspects of French-Australian relations during his term in Canberra), it is impossible not to admire his sincerity, idealism and selfless devotion to the causes he has espoused, and his warm friendship for the people he has encountered and worked with while in Australia.

The essay Explorations has the pleasure of presenting below is a chapter from Albert Salon's latest book, Colas colo, Colas colère, published by L'Harmattan in Paris in 2007 (ISBN 2296031192). The book is both an engaging personal memoir, the story of the author's life and career, and a vigorous political pamphlet. "Colas" is the traditional name of a young French peasant (the way the author sees himself), "colo" refers to both his experience of the vacation camps of his childhood (colonies de vacances) and what Albert Salon perceives as the process of France being colonized, whilst "colère" evokes the anger provoked in him by the decline in national pride and ambition due to the abdication of their responsibilities by a long succession of France's political leaders and so-called "elite" since 1974.

I. B.



Having been trained in my profession at Bonn, I was appointed Cultural and Scientific Counsellor in Australia at our embassy in Canberra. September 1969 would see the beginning of one of the happiest periods of our lives.

Australia is better known now in France than it was in those days. However, the French still lack an accurate understanding of the physical dimensions of this island: about the size of the United States if Russia were to take back Alaska. Reasonably wide strips of productive coastal land surround an immense desert. The major cities are ports. Connections be-

tween them were first made by sea, then by air—with almost no rail system, in contrast to North America. It is an empty continent: about 14 million inhabitants at the beginning of the 1970s. A little over 20 million today. But almost nothing compared to the demographic masses to the north. A temptation for the overpopulated neighbours. In 1970, the “White Australia policy” was still the order of the day.

As for the Aborigines, not all that physically different from the Melanesian “Kanak” of New Caledonia, the indigenous people of Fiji and the New Hebrides (Vanuatu), and the peoples of Papua New Guinea, there remained only a few tens of thousands of them. In the nineteenth century, even the churches in Australia had trouble recognizing them as human beings possessing a soul—despite that issue already having been raised three centuries earlier by the Spanish about their “savages” in America. The Aborigines thus lost much of their population and access to huge parts of their most valuable territory and ancestral sacred sites. In the early 1970s, Australia began attempting to repair this quasi-genocide and to promote the “natives”, all the while continuing to displace them into other parts of the “bush” and desert when great new mineral wealth—in abundance in this continent—was discovered beneath their lands.

From time to time we had to recall this story when our Australian partners accused us—in the best of faith—of colonialism in our Pacific territories. They did so with as much aplomb as the Americans condemning European colonialism in Africa, forgetting that they themselves were invaders who had settled permanently, and had substantially contributed to reducing the original peoples of that land—from a few million at their arrival to 200,000 by 1890. We French had certainly not been exemplary, nor innocent of crime, but, far from facilitating the extermination of our indigenous populations, we had long been dedicated to taking care of and educating them as human beings. In the federal island state of Tasmania, the last native from there was “naturalized” in a glass case at the Museum of Hobart: an example of the remarkable English ability to honour a nuisance once it has been neutralized. Will our current civilization become an attraction at trans-Atlantic museums, like the medieval abbey stones which form the “Cloisters” of New York, and the treasures stolen through the organized pillage of the great museums of Baghdad?

We can firmly reject the criticism of the “Anglo-Saxons”. Did they not, in Canada, further carry out a quasi-genocide, at the first ethnic cleansing among “civilized” peoples, when, at the time of the bloody and merciless “Great Expulsion” of 1755, they banished the French pioneers

established in the fertile land of Acadia? And did they not, during the Boer War in South Africa, invent the prototypes of concentration camps for the Dutch and French Huguenot colonists?

In these circumstances, I arrived in an Australia and a capital that still felt "provincial", yet were enjoying great economic and cultural wealth. Australians were searching for an identity and a vision for the future. They were still strongly attached to the Motherland which had given them solid institutions, the "broad accent" of the cockney convicts and migrants, and the Scottish and Irish. At the same time, they were culturally quite close to Continental Europe—where their brave "diggers" had twice gone to fight and which had been the source of a strong contingent of white migrants—as in an America that Australia and New Zealand were imitating. Finally, obliged to take an interest in the ever stronger presence of Asia, which was perceived both as a potential market and a dangerous threat, they were beginning to turn towards their Asian and Pacific neighbours and to learn some of their languages.

Franco-Australian relations presented some contrasting aspects. They were successful in the military field since the alliances of the world wars and were particularly strong in the air force, which was equipped with Mirage fighters. Economically, the implantation of our large companies was progressing, following on from the wool industry. Politically, the Australian attitude was already ambivalent and has remained so since: generally friendly but fundamentally critical of the French presence in the Pacific, in New Caledonia as well as Polynesia. These territories, despite being thousands of kilometres from the "Aussie" continent, were unwelcome in what was considered as the "backyard" of Anglo-Saxon Australia and New Zealand. We saw this in an explosive and violent manner during the three protest campaigns launched by these "neighbours" against our last atmospheric nuclear tests in Mururoa, in 1972, 1973 and 1974 and then again at the time of the 1995 tests, even though these were underground.

On the other hand, French culture was very present and highly regarded. French was still the most popular foreign language taught in schools, keeping ahead of the fashion for Asian languages—the latter encouraged by the government, but seen as difficult—particularly neighbouring Indonesian.

I arrived at a welcoming and well-functioning French Embassy. The two Ambassadors for whom I worked in an excellent environment were, atypically, very interested in our cultural and scientific mission. The first, André Favereau, a giant of a man from Saint-Malo with a buccaneer's

temperament, had fought gallantly with the Resistance under the *nom de guerre* "Brozen" and had then been military governor of the Palatinate before representing France in Burma. His successor, Gabriel Van Laethem, was one of the economist ambassadors from the Quai d'Orsay, still a rare species in the 1960s. He was a hard worker, precise, calm and crafty. He came from a large family of wool producers in Roubaix who had for a long time worked with Australia, the land that was home to 150 million sheep. They were the best bosses I've had, along with Renaud Vignal with whom I worked later, in Quebec.

I took charge of a Service full of excellent French and Australian contractual associates (Helen Devine, Barbara Cairns, Françoise Lentsch, Odile, Denise...), and a team of French cultural envoys, all young tenured or co-opted secondary school teachers posted to the large cities, with whom we were able to pursue projects of a quality that I've never seen elsewhere. Among others, my thanks go to Daniel Vever, Jean-Michel Le Pecq, François Weiss and Claude Gentier—a colleague from my year at the Ecole Normale whom I met again in Sydney; to Faugère and Raynouard who came later, and in Adelaide to Gabriel (and Michèle!) Brossard, as well as to Philippe Beaussant, today a writer and eminent specialist of French baroque music, elected to the Académie française in October 2007...

Many of them were from the periphery of France: Brittany, Alsace and the Occitane South. Previously in Germany, then later in Mauritius, in Paris at the Ministry for Cooperation, in Quebec and Jamaica, I had directed or come in contact with many of these cultural envoys from our peripheral regions. They were often better for these tasks than the French from "the interior", as they say in Alsace. Probably because they had enough knowledge of their regional culture and its language to be more naturally inclined to open up to other cultures and other languages in their country of assignment. Probably also because the French cultural mission abroad gave them access to interesting and exciting jobs, and a gateway to the world and experiences that were, in their eyes, far more enriching than home postings. In this regard, and taking into account the obvious difference in contexts, we were again witnessing a phenomenon observed throughout the history of the colonial empire, in which minority groups with rich cultural identities contributed so strongly to expansion and administration. France as a "project in the world", whatever this project may be, attracted at least tacit and sometimes ardent support from these people from our border regions. Corsicans left Paoli for Bonaparte/Napoleon, and only went back when the Colonial empire faded...

Here is Gaston Bonheur in *Notre Patrie Gauloise*, on the subject of education and the colonies under the Third Republic:

And then, we went to school for a great future. We left the Occitane language at the door, that's for sure. But in teaching us French, they offered us not just France itself, but the planisphere. I can still see the map where the French territories were coloured pink... In times past the Scots stopped being Scots, the Welsh stopped being Welsh, in order to go to India or to Canada, but today they are becoming Scottish and Welsh again. We are becoming Breton or Occitan again insofar as France has been reduced to Paris.

Of course, we must stress the difference in contexts and motivations. But we must also note that, over the last thirty years, the strong and progressive decline of our cultural and cooperation activity abroad has further weakened the idea of France as a "developing project".

In Canberra, for the first time, I very quickly felt comfortable in my post. Especially with the Australians. Ministers, public servants, academics, MPs, cattle farmers—wealthy "graziers" with immense properties traversed on horseback or in four-wheel drives, and farm houses sometimes furnished in Louis XV, Louis XVI or Chippendale styles—directors of cultural and scientific institutions, artists, businessmen: everyone was very approachable. I discovered they possessed a virtue too rarely seen in France, developed in this new country which was opening up: a natural tendency to put trust first—after having observed them a little and seen them perform, to give people a chance, and finally to value their success without instant jealousy nor the will to sabotage.

I had a first delightful experience very early on. A few weeks after our arrival, we had become aware of the value of creating a French-Australian bilingual school in the federal capital. Canberra, established in 1913 between Sydney and Melbourne to overcome the rivalry between the two great cities which had for a long time contested the honour and advantages of rising to capital status, was in those days enjoying its first real boom. Federal funding was flowing in. The manna was spread over the schools, generously endowed with land, buildings and equipment.

John d'Arcy ran one of these schools, in Red Hill, a neighbourhood full of diplomats, in Astrolabe Street, named in tribute to the explorer La Pérouse, whose own namesake street is close by. John d'Arcy had space. A distant descendant of a Frenchman wounded and cared for in Ireland at the

time of the expedition sent by the *Directoire* to foment insurrection in the British hinterland, he welcomed our people with kindness and trust, and he was enthusiastic about our plans for a bilingual school. We had identified a minimum core of French parents willing to pay the fees to employ a teacher. We had been able to attract a qualified French teacher from Sydney, and to find her French husband a job in a business in Canberra. We still needed the authorization of the New South Wales education minister, responsible for the Australian Capital Territory, a federal territory. Negotiations appeared to be going well, but when the southern hemisphere school year began, authorization had not yet been given. We decided to welcome the students anyway, in our own dining room. A week later, we were able to move into the school in Red Hill, thanks to the *fair play* of our negotiating partners, who gave us our chance.

The French-Australian bilingual school was then able to grow rapidly, with pre-school, then secondary school classes at "Telopea Park High School". The ensemble today is a much sought-after institution, where Australian and foreign parents pre-enrol their children from a very early age. A French-Australian baccalaureate recognized by both governments completes the bilingual curriculum undertaken by more than 500 students.

Another example of fair play, and at the same time of Australian keenness for cultural cooperation with France (not to be confused with political relations), was given during the protest campaigns against our nuclear testing. In the thick of this three-year period, in 1973, when political relations were very bad and all French products were being boycotted, a great cultural project was spared and allowed to succeed.

In those years, the Alliance Française in Canberra was presided over by an eminent academic. Helmut Loofs, a great Australian specialist in the anthropology and archaeology of South-East Asia, was of German origin. Having enlisted as a young adolescent in the Leipzig anti-air defence, he was decorated with the military medal at the age of fifteen, and, in 1945, as a seventeen-year-old trainee officer of the Wehrmacht, was thrown onto the Eastern Front. He then spent some time with France's Foreign Legion in Indochina before undertaking studies at the Sorbonne. A very Francophile scholar, who had begun life in the Hitler Youth...

The Alliance had decided to build a Franco-Australian cultural centre—a "Maison de France"—in Canberra. In addition to a loan from the French Bank (the BNP) in Sydney, a modest grant was wrested from the Head Office of the Cultural Section at the Quai d'Orsay, the Direction Générale.

The project reached maturity during the summer of 1973, at the climax of the boycott and reprisals. Now, the land, which was state property, was handed over as agreed by the government, which did not delay signing off. The builders' union did not stop or slow the construction or the fitting out of the *Maison*, which was completed in five months and was in operation soon after. Only the official opening had to wait a year, until the end of the atmospheric testing. But then, the Prime Minister Gough Whitlam insisted on officiating himself.

During this same difficult period, Ivan Barko, then Head of the French Department at Monash University in Melbourne, and some other Australian Romance Languages academics, had upheld, not without courage, an invitation that they had extended to me to speak at Monash, a major hub of student and staff protest against our "mushrooms". I drove down with my wife, despite repeated warnings from the French *Chargé d'affaires* in Canberra, where our diplomats scarcely ventured outside the Embassy. Not only did everything go very well in Melbourne, but also along the road, in the small town of Deniliquin. I had been invited there by the local MP Al Grassby, then Immigration Minister, to a grand ball held by the Alliance Française. The Minister had also kept to the plan, and had even discouraged the various hosts and guests from snubbing the celebration. Everyone was there! When we arrived, however, the atmosphere, under the rather forced politeness, was that of an ice-box! By the middle of the meal, only a few ice-blocks had melted. Then came the charity raffle. Bam! With all the disruption around the arrangements and the political discussions about the way to welcome us, the tickets had been forgotten. So it was decided that the modest prizes would be put up for auction. One of the top prizes was a magnum bottle of good champagne, very much in demand. All it took was for us to outbid everyone else for the champagne and then offer it to the band. From that moment on, the atmosphere became extraordinarily warm and cheerful. "For he's a jolly good fellow" was sung loudly by everyone, and there were lively dances. We had understood one another. It was a great moment for us, among others, in Australia. A distinction had been made between politics and business on the one hand, and culture and congeniality on the other. Superb!

Also spared were the refresher courses for the French teachers organized in New Caledonia by our Embassy in Canberra.

The nuclear-testing issue and the three years of vigorous protest by Australians and New Zealanders were significant for more than one reason. Firstly because we, as French residents, and more so as diplomats, were

sitting targets. We received envelopes containing radioactive dust in our letter boxes; at our front door we found deliveries of coal or bricks that hadn't been ordered. We were subjected to various sorts of nuisance, as were even our children in school. We had to put up with it.

Secondly, we saw on this occasion to what extent the affair was influenced by opposition to our presence in the Pacific. A few years earlier, Australians had experienced, in their own central desert of Woomera, the British atomic atmospheric tests, which were much "dirtier" than ours. They attracted onlookers who came to watch and photograph the mushroom clouds. Of course, global awareness about ecology and nuclear danger had significantly evolved since that period. I would not seek to deny in principle the legitimacy of the emotion aroused by our tests. But, quite obviously, what the English had been allowed to do on Australian soil, the French were not allowed to do 5,000 kilometres away only a few years later. The main reason for the indignation of our friends: it was in their backyard that France, an ally and friend to be sure, but above all an intruder, had the nerve to test its bombs.

Finally, the whole period was significant because the reactions to our testing program taught us a lot about the functioning of the media in a democratic country with a free press, in the good old reliable British tradition. Until 1972, each year in the Northern Spring—the Australian Autumn—print media relayed, without any particular commentary and to general indifference, the agency dispatches announcing the beginning of our testing program, buried at the back of the newspaper. But in 1972 it seems that both the American and Soviet sides wanted to stop or slow down the expansion of France's nuclear program. This information, known only to our political, diplomatic and military officials, has hardly, it seems, been mentioned since.

As if on cue, news of the tests, with commentary that was more and more hostile, leapt in a fortnight from the back pages to the front page of every newspaper. The same happened on radio and television. I have kept the front page of *The Australian*, from a day during the climax, with two giant images: one of an atomic mushroom and one of the Concorde, which by coincidence had come to Sydney for a demonstration flight, with its black vapour trail depicted as being particularly polluting. A beautiful presentation of blatant proof damning France for her crimes against ecology and her defiance of the major military and economic powers... The indignation of the population was quickly whipped up to a peak. I repeat: I do not contest the legitimacy of public emotion and protest. As for the simultaneity of the

indignation of the media, this could be explained quite easily: when one major newspaper unleashes a campaign, all the rest follow so as not to be left behind. The same phenomenon recurred in 1995 when the French resumed testing, despite the tests now being underground.

Anxious to explain this phenomenon, Australian friends, unaware of what we knew at the Embassy, insist on the independent action, crucial in their eyes, of the Whitlam government and the aftermath of the condemnation of France by the International Court at The Hague, obtained by Australia and New Zealand. Of course. Nevertheless, in 1974, the third year of the protest campaign in the Pacific, after the steadfastness demonstrated by Pompidou and Michel Jobert, and the announcement that the tests would soon be performed underground, France seems to have persuaded the major players to end their hostile actions to its nuclear program.

We thus saw, as if on cue, the news stories about Mururoa recede—again in a little over two weeks—from the front page to the back of the paper. It occurred simultaneously in every newspaper, and in the other media. Meanwhile, information about the—relative—insignificance of the radiation, substantiated by reports of Australian and New Zealand expert inspectors, rose to the fifth or seventh page.

This remarkable experience gave rise to my chronic mistrust of the media's reputation for independence in every country, including my own. Neither the BBC, nor *Le Canard enchaîné*, nor *Le Figaro*, nor, let it be said, *Le Monde*, have prompted me to change my opinion since then. Of course, the rapidity of the massive rise in protest by the media in 1972 could be justified by the sudden awareness of a serious danger and its effect on popular emotions. But, how can we explain the equally rapid relapse in 1974, by all of the media, all at once? Probably not by any sudden disinterest or reassurance felt by public opinion, given it had so recently been fired up by the threat of the deaths of 100,000 babies!... Perhaps it was due more to a gradual change in consensus within such mysterious and powerful global groups and networks as the Bilderberg Group and the Trilateral Commission? Certainly we must be wary of the obsessive fear of global conspiracy. But, nonetheless... Truthful testimony from the likes of Messrs Kissinger, Fontaine, Agnelli, Hallstein may well have helped us to better understand. In any case, the sudden de-escalation of media interest should cause concern about media independence, especially because it followed the same pattern in New Zealand and in other countries in the region...

At the time, our team of cultural envoys was still far from Bilderberg. It worked hard to lower a mountain of prejudiced images of France,

to strengthen the positive images, to open and expand the lines of exchange and cultural, scientific and technical cooperation between the two countries. It did so with the sizable resources obtained from the Direction Générale, topped up by donations from Australians who funded a healthy "slush fund". Such management practice was obviously not legal, but it was duly controlled by the Embassy, which nonetheless denied all knowledge of it when discovered by a Treasury inspector—leaving me to carry full responsibility all alone with the Auditor-General. In any case, it was a very useful fund to support the recruitment of high-quality local bilingual staff and to organize additional exchanges.

An important aspect of our work included the teaching of French in schools, and also in universities—where it was of a rare level of excellence—and in the Alliances Françaises. There were local committees of the Alliance Française in all the large cities in the country and in some medium-sized towns. They were deeply aware of the history of the great navigators of the eighteenth century. The shadows of Bougainville, La Pérouse, Bruni d'Entrecasteaux met with those of the great explorer James Cook and Captain Bligh in Sydney. Baudin, sent by first consul Bonaparte, chanced upon Matthew Flinders in Encounter Bay near Adelaide. More recently, old "diggers" of the two world wars relived memories shared with the "poilus" and the veterans of Free France and the Korean War. These committees were very jealous of their autonomy, and each managed its Alliance in very much its own way. Occasionally, in a few small towns, it became the personal project of some highly cultured and possessive Francophile lady. In the larger ones, French classes, coordinated by "course directors" (French teachers paid by the Direction Générale), were attended by many young people. The cultural and "social" functions were frequent and of remarkable conviviality. There, as in many other countries, the Alliance Française—particularly in Sydney, thanks to the president, Phillip de Boos-Smith, and our own Jean-Michel Le Pecq—knew how to create a welcoming and friendly atmosphere that I've never seen again—either in our official cultural centres and institutes or in comparable foreign institutions. Australia was a quintessential "Alliance country". The Maison de France that we established in Canberra was a project of the Alliance. It was there, in 1973, that the national Federation of Alliances Françaises was set up, in the presence of Marc Blancpain, Secretary General of the worldwide Alliance, placing great trust in us. Other Alliances were created at this time. Even in the small town with the Aboriginal name of Wagga Wagga ("the crows").

There is a similar story in the land of the Papuans. Papua New Guinea was in fact governed by Australia until independence was attained in 1975. That is, with the exception of the western side, a former Dutch colony, also inhabited by Papuans, but annexed by Soekarno's Indonesia when the Dutch left. We will doubtless hear more about this "West Irian" or "Irian Jaya", just as we have recently heard a great deal about Timor. The tragedies involved make it inevitable. It is a seldom discussed fact that Indonesians have shown little interest in giving people under their control access to knowledge and power. Some formerly colonized nations grant themselves a kind of virginity and the right to behave as colonizers far worse than their predecessors, while benefiting from a general indulgence, until such time as genocide awakens the dormant consciences of "western democracies" and the "international community"... I sometimes dream of a France that would staunchly denounce the most obvious and cruel oppressions in the world. Not necessarily the French government, which cannot afford to fall out with established powers, but at least her intellectuals and NGOs. Many oppressed communities need to be defended: West Papuans, Tibetans, Chechens, Native Americans, without forgetting the Christians of the Middle East, of Asia, of Sudan...

I was called to this Papuan region of my constituency to visit the Alliance of the capital, in Port Moresby, and to officiate at the opening of the Alliance in Goroka. The latter was home to the Koukou-Koukou people, deep in the bush of the high plateaus of the north-east, where there were populations still living close to the Neolithic age. In Goroka, the emerging Alliance was attracting almost all of the educated people of the district administrative centre—except for the Australian officials, who adopted a mostly benevolent attitude of disinterest. There were several Papuans involved, but most were the characteristic "three Ms" of white expatriates commonly found in the most remote regions of the world: the "missionaries", people sent by the churches, by the State or who came by themselves, to engage in a mission towards the Indigenous peoples; the "mercenaries", seeking expatriate allowances or the perks of privilege; and finally, "misfits" of all sorts, fleeing the old parapets and miasmas of western civilization, seekers and lovers of some lost paradise, of a return to nature, and of friendly and obliging "noble savages" of both sexes.

There were a few scientists as well, such as the brilliant American biologist of Czech descent, Francophile and perfectly francophone, who was undertaking exciting research on the "Kuru disease". He hoped to find a way to fight multiple sclerosis and nervous system degeneration by studying

the disease affecting Papuans who consumed the brain of their deceased relatives, a traditional funeral practice through which it was believed that the dead person's virtues would be transferred to them.

So, it was a very unusual gathering at this Alliance at the end of the earth. It took place around a Frenchman who was even more unusual himself. Jean Huon de Navrancourt had followed—all the way to New Guinea—the footsteps of Huon de Kermadec, navigator to Louis XVI, second in command under Bruni d'Entrecasteaux, and whose name "Kermadec" was given to the Papuan islands in the north-east. Huon de Navrancourt's path had been almost as adventurous. This solid and warm-hearted man from Nice, effusive, passionate and generous, had dropped out of his medical studies in France, preferring to cut loose and set out to sea. His sailing had taken him to Goroka, where, in a second marriage he wed a native Papuan and raised with her their three "café au lait" children. In his house he proudly displayed, above his Louis-Philippe desk and next to his Australian naturalization certificate, the family tree, which traced his ancestry back to a companion of Charlemagne. He was serving Australia and the Melanesians of New Guinea. In the eyes of the Australian administration he was the health officer, difficult to replace, responsible for the anti-tuberculosis fight in the vast forested region, for tribes who were among the most "primitive" in the world. For the Papuans, thanks in part to their "cargo cult", he was both an eminently good Samaritan white witch, an Australian doctor, and a Frenchman who, far from looking down on them, communicated genuine human warmth and offered them true friendship rarely found in the whites of the area.

France rubberstamped by Canberra. Huon de Navrancourt's knowledge of the land and his connection with the Indigenous people would easily have allowed him, after independence, to be elected as a Papuan member of parliament at the first legislative elections, had the Australian authorities not dissuaded him from standing. He then retired to Australia, to a little town in the north of Queensland, where he founded an Alliance Française. At the time of my visit to New Guinea he was enjoying such prestige and influence that the Australian officials, motivated both by their admiration for his work and an amused and indulgent commiseration for his extravagant Mediterranean character, gave him everything he asked for. He was thus able to drive me around in a large official vehicle, French flag flapping proudly at the front, and show me the region, all the way to Kainantu.

I made a very interesting discovery there for a French cultural envoy. Kainantu had developed as a small white town, a little planet planted

there on its own, self-sufficient and isolated as if in a bubble, connected to the outside world only by the umbilical cord of its airport. A town of linguists and servants of the Book. A group of researchers with their associates, their families and their school, enjoying the massive resources of several American churches brought together in the "Summer School of Linguistics". As happy as a hive of bees in a vast field of many flowers. Papua New Guinea, a mountainous land where the some 2.5 million inhabitants, dispersed throughout its isolated valleys, still spoke more than 800 languages and dialects, was a paradise for linguists. For the linguists, it was about recording all of the languages in a phonetic alphabet, producing dictionaries, grammars and various texts based on English. It was primarily about creating, editing and widely distributing their catechism, textbooks and a few bilingual stories and tales in each language, in order to simultaneously alphabetize and evangelize the Indigenous people in their language and in English. It was a huge task: some of these languages had only a few dozen speakers. But it was very beneficial for the propagation of the English language: a richly endowed cultural action geared to solidly establish the influence not so much of Australia as of a group of American churches. France's cultural action, even though it is often presented as an example of colonialism, has never had—at least outside her colonies—such powerful (although hidden) influence, nor such remarkable efficacy. It was only at the beginning of the twenty-first century, in part thanks to President George W. Bush, that the world discovered the omnipresence and force of the evangelical churches and diverse American sects. France herself has had to observe and endure their growing influence in Haiti, in Ivory Coast, in several Central African countries, and even in her own suburbs, with their local African and West Indian communities.

My duties in Australia extended also, in part, to New Zealand, which had access to our Canberra-based French regional film library. I had a lovely trip there in 1973. I gained the strong impression that one day we would hear more about the Maoris of the North Island. That happened in 2004.

My duties extended further into the Pacific. First of all in New Caledonia, in those days an overseas territory of the Republic, with a population of 150,000, more than 2,000 kilometres from Sydney. The "Grande Terre" and a few islands. A former penal colony, like Australia. Populated by a large third of Melanesian "Kanakas", with dozens of languages; another large third of European "Caldoche" breeders, traders, mine and factory workers in the nickel-filled mountains, and "metros" (expatriates)—for the

most part civil servants. The remainder of the population was composed of the descendants of Indonesians and Vietnamese, then workers from Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna, several thousands of each, all coming to work "in nickel". A Euro-Oceanian-Asian microcosm, quite significantly mixed, yet still with very distinct cultural traditions. Very diverse places of worship. Catholic priests and Protestant ministers shared three quarters of religious practice. A high quality French administration, that at the same time still hesitated to open its territory up to its Pacific surroundings, fearing, with some legitimacy, the appetites of their most powerful neighbours.

Our commando action, led from Australia, played a role in showing the benefits of openness for New Caledonia, especially in the cultural field. Before 1969, during the southern hemisphere's summer school holidays in January, Noumea hosted a series of so-called "Sorbonne" lectures, given by Professor Georges Matoré with the help of our embassy in Canberra. This "French civilization course" was aimed at both Australian and New Zealand teachers of French and the local population. Quite quickly it proved possible, by calling on our team of Alliance Française directors and our French pedagogical assistants in the Australian state education ministries and departments, to transform this series of lectures into a large-scale cultural and educational refresher programme for teachers from the two main countries concerned. It was then extended, with the help of my colleague in Jakarta, to teachers of French in Indonesia. And it was further improved by increasingly prestigious cultural events. We brought French filmmakers for a mini French film festival, and finally expanded it into a Pacific French cultural festival, thanks to the understanding of local authorities. Firstly, the French nationals: with High Commissioner Gabriel Eriau, and his two colleagues who were remarkably open and efficient; Claude Erignac, then Secretary General, later assassinated in Corsica (I pay tribute to this great senior civil servant!); and Pierre Steinmetz, head of the High Commissioner's Cabinet, who subsequently became the director of the Gendarmerie in Paris, then head of Prime Minister Raffarin's Cabinet. Locals also. Jean-Marie Tchibaou, assassinated after the bloody events on the island of Ouvea, and the President of the Assembly, Yann Céléne Uréguei, provided the local support of the festival. With their help we motivated, even trained, artistic groups of different cultures to perform: Kanaks, "Javanese", Vietnamese, Wallisian, Tahitian . . . all with Caledonian funds deposited—oh what sacrilegious accounting practice!—in my special personal account (it was nonetheless monitored) at the Caledonian branch office of the Bank of Indochina.

This all occurred with only minimal and reluctant interest from the RFO-Noumea television station. I well remember a revealing interview I had with a young journalist by the name of Jean-Marie Colombani—aloof, even cagey and disdainful, sporting a shirt with the Corsican flag on it. He was on the road to the editorship of *Le Monde*. Beginnings of a “cheer” leader of the current “politically correct” brigade.

The success of the first festival in January 1974 was such that it led the minister of the Overseas Territories and Departments (DOM-TOM) to send me, with the blessing of the Quai d’Orsay, on a mission to the New Hebrides and Tahiti to investigate the possibility of its extension to these Pacific territories with the local French and regional authorities. The French-British condominium of the New Hebrides was not yet independent under the name of Vanuatu. At Port-Vila and on the two main islands of Vati and Santo the atmosphere was comparable to that of Fashoda, so intense was the rivalry between the French and the English, beneath the surface of an almost courteous indifference. The English, it has been claimed, hastened independence a few years later because France, particularly in the education field, was gaining the upper hand. Let no one be under any angelic illusion: the competition persists there with renewed vigour, and it is fierce, at least from the Anglophone side, on account of the country’s membership of both the Commonwealth and the French-speaking community.

In Port-Vila, as in Papeete, as in Noumea, as in the other overseas departments and territories with which I had the privilege of working to promote our cultural policy, I could see that those in authority gradually became sympathetic to our efforts. I also suspected that despite the protectionism of some powerful local interests, this opening up towards us had the potential of extending into the spheres of economic and political relations.

On the whole, however, we could count less and less on the interest and support of the government in Paris for our endeavours. The centurions in the *limes*, in the border provinces, were going to be reduced to fighting alone, suffering the indifference of Rome, and the scorn, if not the hostility of the political class.

Yet France has so much to offer! May she remember it and may she again make use of her potential, in the overseas departments and territories, and everywhere else. Her cultural policies abroad, so little known, were of special interest to me and I had started to gather information on their past and present. I decided to shape all this rich material into a major doctoral thesis. The collecting of the material and the preparation of the thesis took

me ten years, carried out simultaneously with my professional activities. I defended my thesis at the Sorbonne in 1981, a few years after my term of office in Canberra.²

Paris

² The published summarized version of Albert Salon's thesis is *L'Action culturelle de la France dans le monde*, Paris, F. Nathan, 1983.