

A FRENCHWOMAN IN MELBOURNE: HER CONTRIBUTION TO THE ALLIANCE FRANCAISE

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A petite Frenchwoman, Madame Marguerite Cockerton, became well-known in Melbourne for nearly forty years, mainly through her work for the Alliance Française. This period included seventeen years as Honorary Secretary of this cultural society, from the late twenties to 1944, and a further sixteen years when she became its first and only General Secretary, which she remained until her retirement in 1960.

Her importance to the Alliance Française lay not just in her dedication and hard work, but in the extraordinary number of tasks she could undertake that a General Secretary is not usually required to do.

Early memories I have are of her as an actress in *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* by Molière, then in other numerous plays in which she appeared or directed, or both. A "soubrette" in type, Madame Cockerton, as she was always called, often played the role of a lively servant, parts which abound in classic French theatre. With small height and rounded figure, pleasant countenance with small features and high cheekbones, bright blue eyes and thick chestnut hair, she could be pert, provocative, and laugh inordinately on stage as long as necessary, a gift not generally shared by the amateur players around her. On the other hand, she could don a white satin tricorne with matching gown and charmingly portray an eighteenth-century marquise in *Le Souper Blanc* by Edmond Rostand.

The output of plays during her time at the Alliance, first between the two wars, then for a long period after the Second War, was very large. It was an excellent medium for the hearing of good French and, for those who acted in them, an excellent practice; and their continuity was mostly assured by Madame Cockerton's efforts. A society then sustained almost completely by voluntary helpers among its members was lucky to have an enthusiast who could produce three-act dramas that spanned four centuries, modern plays from the Paris Boulevards and a host of one-act pieces, dominated by French farce and pictures of nineteenth-century bourgeois morality. These short plays added to a few art songs, a solemn monologue or two, some fine poems and a short address helped form many programmes for the Alliance monthly "soirées".

There was virtually an unofficial company of people used to performing on stage together. In the earlier period, they included Madame Albertine Gay and her husband, Mr René Vanderkelen, Mr Jean Studer (later Consul of Switzerland) and Mr James Cornell (later Professor Cornell of the University of Adelaide). Treading the boards with them were members of the French colony, including woolbuyers and their wives, young and older academics from the Uni-

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versity of Melbourne, Australian girls who had attended finishing schools in Switzerland and young professional men eager to improve their French.

After a pause during the Second War when this Thespian activity ceased, a new group of French-speaking players appeared, newcomers to Australia from Egypt, the Balkan and Baltic countries, delivering their lines beside a fresh crop of Australian academics and a changing French community. Except on few occasions, Madame Cockerton was in charge, taking rehearsals during week-nights and leading stumbling and often awkward amateurs to feel at ease presenting the formal seventeenth-century style and speech, eighteenth-century grace and elegance, nineteenth-century passionate romanticism or casual and sophisticated contemporary dialogue. The producer sometimes frightened her team, but it was also fun.

Later, she would see that settings, lighting, costumes and make-up were correct. Drawn into performances since I was a schoolgirl, I remember costumes always being hired from Ada Colton (theatrical costumière recorded in the archives of Melbourne's Arts Centre), wigs were from Barnett and make-up applied by a charming former leading man in operetta in an earlier Melbourne, Reginald Roberts.

Powdered, rouged and sometimes bewigged, players would then appear in venues all over the city: the Garrick Theatre near Prince's Bridge (to-day obliterated by the Arts Centre), Central Hall, Nicholas Hall, the Union Theatre and Melba Hall at the University of Melbourne, but the most often in Kelvin Hall, now site of the Playbox Theatre. The Alliance Française, with an office-library in McEwan House and later a larger locale in Nicholas Building, could not present any plays in its own premises.

Apart from her role as actress and producer, in what other ways did Marguerite Cockerton prove so valuable in her post?

The General Secretary's job comprised many duties: the preparation of monthly circulars, impossible to complete until future programmes are planned, the choosing of suitable lecturers among French visitors to Melbourne or local intellectuals. With a few helpers, Madame Cockerton seemed to have little trouble in organising the Annual Ball at the Lower Melbourne Town Hall; and she also arranged, with some assistance, the annual examinations in poetry, dictation and conversation for secondary school students... a task that, becoming massive, required further professional help. I remember the first visits by Alliance Française examiners to country centres, where we were treated like "film stars" by collegians gathered in Ballarat, Bendigo and Geelong to compete for prizes sent from Paris.

"Margot", as her friends knew her, also supervised French conversation groups, acted as librarian, gave some French lessons. Doing her fair share of propaganda, she enrolled new members. She could be called to arrange a recep-

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tion for a French visiting celebrity... famous authors, musicians, actors. As well, the Alliance Française, being the senior society connected with France and its culture in Melbourne, was often drawn into events a bit outside its field, like the organising of outings and picnics for visiting French sailors or, during the Second War, soldiers and the stocking and manning of Exhibition Stands where France had to be represented. I remember Madame Cockerton directing a French Food Stall at a Garden Fair in the grounds of the Institute for the Deaf; and I helped her at a French Art Stand at the Melbourne Town Hall for another worthy cause and in the Exhibition Building, where I recall selling good French prints.

Nothing seemed to daunt her, and if unsure, she always "had a go". In the early days of the Moomba Festival, it was suggested the society provide a float in the procession. An attractive idea from a professional source proved too costly. A day or two before the parade, a large truck appeared on Madame Cockerton's front lawn in Toorak. With assistants hurriedly mobilised, the truck was transformed with flowers and bushes tastefully arranged, a bit of patriotic red-white-and-blue included. Candidates of both sexes were found to man the conveyance and the Alliance Française had its float in Moomba.

Through its close ties with the Consulate and official France, the Alliance Française was drawn into patriotic manifestations as well. The Liberation of Paris had to be fêted. Alliance help was also sought in early French Commercial Festivals, as in 1956.

It must be underlined that a Committee always existed, to propose, support and agree to various proposals for Alliance activities. Some people, like Madame Gay, President from 1940 to 1959, were important in decision-making. Mr Manuel Gelman, the well-known educationist, gave splendid assistance. For many years, he organised the yearly prize-giving evening for students at the Assembly Hall, and was closely associated with the annual "Festival Dramatique", in which secondary school and University students performed extracts from French plays.

Nonetheless, for some of her time as General Secretary Madame Cockerton was often spoken of as "being the Alliance"! On her departure, the University took over the performance of plays on the schools curriculum. Courses in French, sometimes previously offered voluntarily by trained teachers, became so demanding that a Director of Courses, seconded from the French Education Department, was sent from France in 1966 to take charge of them, and also direct day-to-day duties. If five or six paid staff now carry out the Alliance Française's work in premises it purchased, because of the "Maison de France" Appeal I inaugurated in 1970, and if it has more members and more impressive financial receipts than in the days of the General Secretary, it is still amazing how much was achieved in her day. Interesting programmes appeared monthly,

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big and small events occurred in between; and the Ball, the Play for Schools and the Annual Examinations rolled inexorably on to provide non-profit finance.

What was Marguerite Cockerton really like? What was her style? When she was presiding at her desk in the Alliance Library, the steady gaze from her blue eyes would acknowledge the entrance of a new or old faithful member. Sometimes, she would be bright and cheerful, sometimes sharp, perhaps harassed, and she could be rude.

She actually was a "maîtresse-femme". In Women's Lib. parlance, this translates literally as "master-woman". However from a French point of view, this type of woman, though strong and determined, is also entirely feminine, and this makes her quite formidable. It was her voice, strong and definite, that made you aware she was not a non-person. Being French, she did not hesitate to say what she thought, and on occasion more than some people might; and this made some controlled and British-nurtured Australians in the society quail before her.

Always well-groomed, she remained remarkably young-looking during her long association with the Alliance; and at the end of her term when she would have been more than seventy years old, it would have been impossible for a newcomer to guess her age. And her voice and spirit kept company with her youthful appearance.

When one rebelled against her indomitability, then saw her in her full-length grey squirrel coat and little toque setting out for examinations in the country, or in a graceful taffeta evening dress with flares and draping leading the "Farandole" at the "Quatorze Juillet" Ball, one lost courage. She knew how to enjoy herself and cut off completely from Alliance Française formulas, originally set down in Paris in 1893, and that she so staunchly upheld.

It would be a serious omission, when writing of this Frenchwoman's place in Melbourne, not to mention her devoted English husband, Walter Cockerton, who, though not participating in the organising of Alliance Française proceedings, was always on the side-line, quietly smiling, calling to fetch his wife home, waiting at the end of a "soirée" until she was ready, always driving her and her team to any rendez-vous away from the city.

The arrival and establishment of this couple in Australia make an interesting story, a "success" story. Born in the Charente in Western France on a farm called "Les Brousses de Neuviq" as she wrote in my visitor's book, she and her brother had a very unhappy childhood because of a cruel stepmother. Happy to leave the family home, she trained as a hairdresser in Paris and what would today be called a beautician. Her brother was killed in the First War.

Obtaining a position as beauty consultant to a beautiful Australian woman, Mrs George Chirnside, member of the famous Western District family and châtelaine of "Werribee Park", "Airlie" in South Yarra and a property at

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Point Cook, Marie-Marguerite Feugnet, as she then was, was to travel to Australia from London with the family to take up her duties. She also helped a daughter of the house with French.

In London, she met Walter Cockerton, who, in service since he was sixteen, was house steward to the Member of Parliament for the Isle of Wight. "We had three houses, one on the Isle of Wight, one in London, and another in Sussex", he said. He fell in love with Marguerite Feugnet, whom he vowed to follow to Australia to marry. Practical, she suggested he speak to the Chirnside family; and that is how he travelled by ship to Melbourne in charge of sixteen staff members Mr Chirnside had recruited in London. He prepared "Airlie" in South Yarra to receive the family, which arrived a month later. Years afterwards, he was to speak nostalgically of the houseparties of fifty who would spend a week at "Werribee Park", with organised polo matches, cricket matches, shooting and fine dinners and dances every day.

The Cockertons were married in 1913. She soon opened her own beauty salon in Melbourne, which she retained until being appointed General Secretary of the Alliance Française. Through interest in the theatre, she began a drama group, the Proscenium Club, to stage English plays, one in the thirties in the Bijou Theatre based on items in Samuel Pepys' Diaries, *And so to Bed*. With just a trace of French accent, her English was well modulated and, of course, she could be heard at the back of the house.

Walter Cockerton, on his side, acquired an excellent reputation for establishing exclusive guest-houses, a type of accommodation that no longer exists in Melbourne. The first property he leased was "Yarra House", later as "Phelia Grimwade House" to be part of the Melbourne Church of England Girls' Grammar School. Apart from the distinguished guests, "Yarra House" became a centre for private and charity parties and had its place in the city's social life.

In 1924, Mr Cockerton's next venture was to begin a French restaurant at the top of Collins Street. Attended by Parliamentarians, barristers and doctors, it was a great success, but, with the Depression looming, its owner decided to close the café rather than lower his standards and returned to direct smart guest-houses.

One house he leased was "Denham" on the corner of Hopetoun Road and Whernside Avenue in Toorak, luxuriously furnished former home of Mr and Mrs Rupert Wertheim. Another house he managed was "Shipley House" in South Yarra, a former home in youth of Lord Casey, where the Cockertons were to live for twenty-five years.

The houses Mr Cockerton chose always had beautiful gardens with a lawn tennis-court, on which he enjoyed playing each Saturday with friends. Guests were not numerous and usually had their own sitting-rooms, so people were free, unencumbered. He seemed to attract guests who were interesting, not

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specially young but who had had colourful careers and did not wish to look after houses of their own any longer. Conversation in the stylish dining-room from the separate tables was often thought-provoking, diverting.

I know these facts as my parents and I stayed both in "Denham" and "Shipley House" for short periods. The Cockertons had their own quarters and one hardly saw them, but through living in these houses we learnt to know this couple better. Their sitting-room had fine books and silver, a few good pieces of furniture. "Madame" did not mix at all in the management of the house, just as her husband did not participate in her business. To Women's Libbers, it would be an ideal arrangement. However, as concerns the questioning of the marriage tie prevalent to-day, the Cockertons would not be in agreement. Their marriage was perfect, a happy, quiet, permanent relationship.

As the couple developed and prospered, they began to have a larger part in French social events. The fine rooms at "Shipley" were lent for a lecture by an eminent French engineer, its best sitting-room was loaned for a 14th-July morning reception hosted by the Vice-Consul of France, Monsieur Roger Loubère. They entertained the Ambassador of France, Monsieur Gabriel Padovani, to dinner in the grand dining-room with service and meal irreproachable. I was invited to three fine New Year's Eve dinners in the same dining-room, again with impeccable service and food.

Always busy, Madame Cockerton knitted, read. She studied hard to improve her French, admirable in somebody with a busy adult life. With many friends and acquaintances in Melbourne, she was extremely well adapted to the Australian "ambiance".

Always quiet and pleasant but well able to defend himself, her husband thoroughly enjoyed the public and private French events he attended. He conceded to France by also studying French and, in addition, took to wearing a good navy-blue beret.

When his wife died in 1969 at the age of 81, he had printed in her obituary notice, "After fifty-seven years of happy marriage". He listed her awards which naturally included the Bronze, Silver and Gold Medals of the Alliance Française, and from the French Government, Officier de l'Instruction Publique, Officier des Palmes Académiques and Médaille d'Argent des Affaires Etrangères.

Armada

Notes

Documentation: Personal recollections of the writer and material from the Alliance Française Archives she has gathered, and from personal scrapbooks and photograph albums.

In her enlightened and unswerving example, Madame Cockerton certainly influenced me in my decades of work for the Alliance Française. C.R.