

JAMES SMITH

LURLINE STUART

The nineteenth-century Melbourne journalist James Smith had a particular appreciation of the use of language. He read widely in preparation for his work as a feature writer and critic, buying books by foreign authors and reading foreign language periodicals as well as those printed in English, in order to diversify his subjects and extend their interest. He was also active in the translation of articles and, on occasion, of longer works such as the collection of lectures given in Melbourne by Irma Dreyfus from 1893 to 1895, and published by Longmans in 1896 as *Lectures in French Literature*.

Both Smith and his wife Eliza were proficient in several languages but especially fluent in French and Italian. Oscar Comettant, in Melbourne in 1888 as a member of the French jury at the Centennial International Exhibition, describes an evening at the Smith home:

At Monsieur and Madame James Smith's house I was present as though I were in Paris, at the Théâtre-Français, a performance of a play by Molière, with the main roles being played by the master and mistress of the house. There was not one of our great comic author's intentions that was not understood and made clear by these Melburnian interpreters. I was proud of my country, seeing Molière thus admired and enthusiastically clapped, four thousand leagues from his own house, in a country whose very existence was not even suspected at the time when the *Misanthrope* was written.¹

Similar activities continued for many years, while James and Eliza Smith became active members of French clubs and societies in which they frequently played a leading part.

It is probable that Smith was involved with the French Club, founded in Melbourne in 1884 as a social and patriotic club for French colonists and their friends. However, the extent of his connection is unknown. He was a founding member and the first President of the French Literary Club in 1886. This organisation held regular soirées under the guidance of Monsieur G. le Roy, when French socialities and caricatures were translated into English, articles from leading Melbourne journals were translated into French, and members held French conversations. All explanations, questions and answers were written on a blackboard, so that no previous knowledge of the language was necessary.

When a branch of the Alliance Française was founded in Melbourne in 1890, it superseded the functions of both the French Club and the French Literary Club. James Smith was an enthusiastic supporter, serving on the committee, giving readings and taking part in the presentation of dramatic scenes from

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the work of French novelists and playwrights. His wife Eliza was also an active member, and Vice-President of the society for twenty-five years.

Smith maintained a parallel interest in Italian culture, being a foundation member of the Dante Society which began in Melbourne in 1896 and acting as its President for eight successive years. He was honoured for his services to the language and literature of their respective countries by the French and Italian governments, being named as an Officier d'Académie of the French Republic in 1902, and given the decoration "Cavaliere dell' Ordine della Corona d'Italia" in 1901.

Burwood

Notes

1. Oscar Comettant. *In the Land of Kangaroos and Goldmines*, tr. Judith Armstrong, Adelaide, Rigby, 1980, p. 225.