

ANTOINE DENAT – A FRENCH PRESENCE IN AUSTRALIA

MARGARET DENAT

Antoine Henri Marcel Louis Denat, L.-ès-L., D.E.S., M.A., Officier des Palmes Académiques, Croix de Guerre, and Third Order Dominican, lived in Australia from 1949 to 1976. He was Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, then Reader in French in the Universities of Queensland, New England, Sydney and Melbourne. His chief interests were modern poetry, philosophy from Descartes to Sartre, and literary criticism. Active in the Alliance Française, he often gave “causeries” on contemporary art, literature, and his native Languedoc. An enthusiastic and gifted “comédien”, he produced and acted in plays such as Aymé’s *Les Oiseaux de Lune*, Mauriac’s *Asmodée*, Pagnol’s *César*, Montherlant’s *La Reine Morte*, and Ionesco’s *La Leçon* and *La Cantatrice Chauve*. He was often in demand for “Schools’ Night” for Matriculation students, reciting poetry, which also was broadcast on ABC Schools Programmes. He was famous for his rendering of La Fontaine fables – students who later came to the University of Melbourne would soon recognise his voice on their Language Laboratory tapes. He was a regular member of the Public Examinations Oral French Examiners, and enjoyed travelling to remote country towns to hear pupils recite; his dictations were enlivened by gestures and laughter, which put nervous examinees at their ease – a master psychologist! A foundation member of AUMLA (later AULLA), he attended every Congress and read papers of wide diversity – Péguy, Camus, Ponge, Simenon, Pataphysics, Structuralism. These have appeared in the journal AUMLA. He had articles published in *Meanjin*, *Le Courrier Australien*, the *Australian Journal of French Studies* and *Synthèses* (Brussels). Also he wrote five short works while he was in Australia: *Media Vita* (religious meditations), *Fragments Terrestres* (stories and travel memories), *Cinq Petites Odes* (prose poems) – all published by Hoertel, Sydney (1960-1970). Finally, he wrote *Vu des Antipodes* (Didier, Paris, 1971) (critical essays not about Australia, but written in Australia). *Carrefours Critiques* followed, but was unfinished at his death. He wrote much light “occasional” verse, and once composed a poem in English, based on street signs and car stickers which had appealed to him in his car journeys (“STOCK CROSSING: beef or chicken cubes?”) Other intellectual exploits included the translation, every two years, of the Italia Prize: in 1969 *Death of a Wombat* won the prize, and he retained a special affection for Australian fauna ever after.

He contributed in other ways to the Australian community: reading the “Narrator” for a Berlioz Oratorio performed in Melbourne; delivering an address on Maritain at a Requiem Mass for the philosopher; he was modest about his generous gifts to many charities, but was rather proud of his car sticker “Support the Fitzroy Police Youth Centre” and of his membership of the Com-

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mercial Travellers' Association – odd as this may seem... (An inveterate traveller, but not a commercial one.)

A passionate hater of war, he nevertheless attended the Dawn Service on 11 November, with fellow ex-soldiers and P.O.W.s who had survived World War II.

A French Presence, indeed. He was much loved by many, and, while remaining very "French", sought to know Australia and its people more deeply. (He even married an Australian.) His funeral was attended by the Consul-General for France, ex-pupils, colleagues, neighbours, the grocer, the postman, the Spanish "home help", the nurses who cared for him in his last illness, and many friends both French and Australian, not to mention his wife's assorted relatives.

I forgot to add that he was an expert on cooking "cassoulet" – from the recipe of his Tante Marceline, and even after he lost the use of one arm – the result of a stroke – enjoyed "remote control cuisine" – shouting from his bedroom "Plenty of garlic now, and add more beans!"

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