

THE IDEA OF FRANCE IN VICTORIA

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This conference has been conceived – very properly – as a follow-up to the exhibition held last year, *The French Presence in Victoria, 1800-1901*. There we were made aware of all manner of things, ranging from French-inspired etiquette to Fauchery's photographs of diggers amid the mud and slush; of Celeste Mogador, Sarah Bernhardt and M. Soudry, the visitor to the 1800 Exhibition who diverted himself with someone else's wife, then had to face an irate husband's pistol shot one night at the theatre. We also saw French costumes, French textbooks that were printed in Melbourne, together with libretti to French operas; and were made aware of French clergy, vigneron, and the hitherto obscure artist Mme Mouchette and the musician Leon Caron.

Rather than add directly to the store of factual knowledge, I would like to suggest some lines of approach that might be borne in mind in dealing with the French presence in Victoria.

The first point, and one that must be stressed, is that the most direct influence, that of immigration, was always slight. At the height of the gold rush period, in 1857, the French community numbered scarcely more than 1,400 people, which made it the largest in Australia; many drifted away, and the figure was not to be reached again until 1954, when, according to the census, there were 1,497 French-born people resident in Victoria. In other words, at the time the speculators of Marvellous Melbourne and the home country were laying out streets to be filled with cottages and terraces with their polychromatic brick, stucco, pediments and urns, very few French people were here – or came here – to take part in it all. Although Melbourne in the 1880s almost doubled in size, from a population of 268,000 in 1881 to 473,000 in 1891, the French population was a mere 1,300 at the end of the decade – about 1/4 of 1%. And this computation assumes that they all lived in Melbourne, which we know not to have been the case. By 1901 there were a mere 528 French people in Melbourne, and just on double that number in Sydney, a situation that obtained until 1950; even before the boom of the 1800's was over, Sydney's French community had leapt ahead. But whereas in 1901 there were 528 French people in the city of Melbourne, by 1947 numbers had steadily shrunk to the point where there was an almost identical figure of 529 for the whole of Victoria. Thereafter they steadily rose, no doubt in response to the postwar immigration programme: to 1,497 in 1954, and, after a dramatic increase in the late Sixties, to 3,421 in 1976. Victoria's French community still trailed New South Wales', which in the census of that year numbered 4,727.

Even today, then, the numbers are still small. We must, of course,

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pay all due attention to migrants, whether by examining diaries, letters, journal articles and newspaper reports, ascertaining both their reasons for coming to Australia – the “pull” factors – together with those for leaving France – the “push” factors. We need to assess the influence they exerted in their working and in their social lives, particularly noting the factor of intermarriage; this could effectively serve to widen the French community beyond those meagre figures. Nevertheless the fact remains that – unlike the postwar Italians and Greeks – the French in Victoria were not themselves the only, and perhaps not even the main, conduit of French influence here.

If we follow the exhibition and interpret a French “presence” to mean the aggregate of all things in Victoria stemming from France, whether they be people, *objets*, books, customs, gestures or speech, then it can be seen that the “presence” is extraordinarily pervasive. There was an idea of France at work in the community which comprised a series of variations on stated French themes.

Let me provide two examples. The first is taken from the biography I am now writing, the life of Louise Dyer.

“1922 saw the tercentenary of the birth of Molière. When it was learned that the *Alliance Française* had hired the Masonic Hall for a celebration, few Melburnians would have thought much of it. But as July 12 approached, word of the preparations got about and many of the more cultivated members of society made sure that they were there. The gloomy interior of the building had been transformed. Even the festoons on the pressed iron balustrade looked festive again, for above them were masses of foliage peppered with real oranges, while below, reaching upwards, were tall orange trees in full bearing, placed to obscure the old-fashioned cast-iron pillars; similarly the floor was green – carpeted in the rows where the public were sitting down – and covered with grass clippings in the larger spaces. A terrazzo path ran down the centre of the hall; as more people entered, four girls in seventeenth century costume advanced to place a programme in the hands of the gentlemen, while a symbolic posy of wattle, tied with a ribbon in the French national colours, was given to their ladies. Further down the aisle, standing by a sundial, Louise and Jimmy received their guests, he with gloves in hand, she with a gold and ivory feathered fan held like a sceptre; resplendant in her gold-tissue frock with its long floating sleeves (also gold), the mild eccentricity of her lisp was scarcely noticed as she apportioned ardent greetings. Beyond, through the buzz of conversation, a string quartet could just be heard, its women in costume playing without music from the steps in front of the stage.

The seated audience was at its most expectant and defensively formal when a photographer’s light-bulb flashed, and the entertainment began. The scene, Louise announced from the stage, was the Orangerie of le Petit Trianon at

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Versailles, the object, for she stood beside a large laurel-wreathed bust of Molière, was to celebrate "the French Shakespeare". The English gloss she so readily brought to the occasion – knowing as she did her audience – carried across to her spoken French, as a schoolboy in the audience (later a professor of the language) could not help noticing. Few others would have: newspaper reports convey the novelty of a milieu of spoken French, one account even referring to its 'soft accents'."

Without continuing the narrative into the programme that evening – which has interest as one of Louise Dyer's first ventures in Baroque music – there are a number of points to be made. One is that this function of the *Alliance* was able to be taken over by an enterprising Melbourne society woman (because she was prepared to pay for it) and fashioned very much to her own purpose – music – so that Molière was to some degree elbowed out by Lully, Rameau, Grétry and other French composers: but then the *Alliance*, while founded in 1890 by Madame Mouchette, had drawn considerably on the support of James Smith, a critic who epitomised the cultural standards of the Melbourne of the day. The *Alliance* was not so much *Française* as an expression of the idea of France. The language barrier, once crossed – or even fitfully jumped from time to time – functioned as a social one. Thus the occasion described, and even more so the series of lectures on French music which followed it in 1925 – saw the establishment at play. There was no hint here of the Melbourne Police Strike, or of the secret armies formed by right-wing returning soldiers, some of whom must have been present in the audience. All that belonged to quite another sphere. Rather, General Monash, the Consuls, the Commonwealth Solicitor-General and other notables – Melbourne then being the national capital – came to such entertainments because they were the work of women at their decorative best, cultivated affairs executed by the *Alliance* President Louise Dyer with flair, and above all in French – still prestigious in the male world as the language of diplomacy, and of much travel. Significantly, many of these people did not attend the functions of the British Music Society, which Mrs Dyer promoted no less assiduously: their Britishness did not need to be demonstrated, while as for music pure and simple (especially when it was not simple) it was still regarded with some suspicion: the question "Is he musical?" served more usually at that time to air doubts about someone's sexuality.

It was not merely the establishment which fashioned an idea of France. This year marks the centenary of the foundation of a Melbourne Anarchists' Club, and my second example concerns a figure of some importance in it, the journalist and public speaker J.A. Andrews. Andrews' ideas were derived largely from Kropotkin, but he read widely in a number of foreign languages, and in French in particular. His career reminds us that France not only represented etiquette, fashion and mansard roofs, but also Rousseau, Comte, Saint-Simon,

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Proudhon and the Commune of 1871, references to which recur in Andrews' writings. Nowadays we tend to forget the fact that, before the Russian Revolution, France was generally regarded as the hotbed of European radicalism.

Louise Dyer's entertainments, together with Andrews' journalism, indicate the diverse elements in the Victorian community entertaining an idea of France. It should not be forgotten, of course, that the idea was actively promoted. In addition to the export of goods and concepts from France, there were formal missions - permanent in the case of the consulates, momentary in the case of the many visiting naval ships: somewhat unofficial in the case of the Prince de Condé (a grandson of Louis Philippe) but most significant in the military mission of General Pau. The General came to Australia towards the end of World War I, when it seemed it could go on forever, with the aim of mustering further support: his reception was rapturous, and no less so when peace unexpectedly broke out.

The idea of France also existed among those Australians who were drawn there, either to advance their careers - ranging from Melba going to Mathilde Marchesi in 1886 to Rod Quantock going to the Lecoq School of Mime - or as mere tourists. Some of the reactions of the latter are not without interest, if only because of the light they shed on Australian assumptions. Usually people can perceive only a variation of what they have already experienced, or are on the threshold of understanding. But occasionally an observation is made which illuminated conditions in both countries - such as the Victorian squatter Thomas Shaw going to the Paris Opéra in the early 1880s and, while marvelling at the production and the fine orchestra, deciding quite definitely that he had heard finer singing in Melbourne.¹ This comment points to both the early emergence of an exceptional number of fine singers in Australia, and perhaps also to slipshod standards in French opera that were to lead to its decline. Certainly in our own time the revival of interest in the dramatic works of Berlioz and in some respects Rameau originated outside France, while in particular the revival of Massenet owes very much to the work of the Australians Richard Bonyngé and Joan Sutherland.

An idea of France also existed, of course, among those who never went there. And it could, on occasion, be quite hostile. A writer in the *Argus* married Tory politics with traditional francophobia when he remarked, in connection with the events leading to the establishment of the Paris Commune in 1871, "The reviewer discovers in the present position of France the legacy of littleness and impotence bequeathed to her from the Revolution". No doubt similar remarks were made in connection with the Popular Front of 1936 or the dying days of the Fourth Republic; a characteristically Australian suspicion of high culture, in contrast to the persistent French faith in its efficacy, led to a particu-

larly pugnacious endorsement of the traditional Anglo-Saxon distaste for what was seen as French excitability, instability, frivolity, and – ahem – naughtiness. It must be remembered, too, that suspicion was kept alive first by veterans of the Napoleonic Wars among the first settlers, then – after the interlude of Napoleon III – by imperial rivalries culminating in the Fashoda incident of 1897, when Britain and France almost went to war over a territorial dispute in Africa, and that, even after the Entente Cordiale of 1903, there was later to be the complication of Vichy France.

Such vicissitudes in the relationship were determined by events on either side of the English Channel; for Australians there was the additional complication posed by events in the Pacific. People here were opposed to the French occupation of New Caledonia in 1853, and were even more outraged by the transportation of convicts there than they are today by the nuclear tests at Mururoa. In four months of 1883 there were no less than 53 demonstrations across the country against the French policy of transporting convicts to New Caledonia, particularly recidivists. Such agitations need to be examined, together with Australian relations with the French Pacific territories generally. While interest in them may have been greater in Sydney than in Melbourne, the New Hebrides in particular was a preoccupation of the southern city.

In counterbalance to those indifferent or mildly hostile to the idea of France, however, were the activities of a number of agencies, of which the *Alliance Française* has clearly been the most important. The Melbourne branch was the fifth to be founded in all the world. Mme Mouchette, its founder, also ran a school at Oberwyl in St Kilda; lessons were conducted in French, as Oscar Comettant noted with approval on his visit there in 1888. There were other such schools – in an age when schools were often tiny – including those run by Monsieur and Madame Liet in Brighton, and the Ladies' College in St Kilda generally known as Madame Permezel's academy; the latter, however, was not as French as it seemed. Mme Permezel had married a Lyonnais and was therefore a francophile in every conceivable way, but in fact owed her education and pedagogical vigour to her Congregational background in London. Then, from 1887, when E.E. Morris was appointed to a chair of English, French and German – Common Market Studies – the language and literature began to be taught at the University of Melbourne. Shortly after A.R. Chisholm's arrival as Professor of French in 1921 (a post he held for nearly forty years) it became plain that, in addition to the *Alliance*, French culture now had a second focus in Melbourne. French-teaching in schools became much more extensive, and much more organised: indeed one can see now that the Fifties and Sixties were probably the golden age of teaching the language in schools. Chisholm's contribution to Rimbaud and Mallarmé studies are well known, as also is his work on the Australian poets Christopher Brennan and John Shaw Neilson. By the 1930's,

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the first students from Melbourne were going to France for postgraduate studies – which was rather more venturesome than it may sound, for at that time Australia had so little sense of itself as a nation that it maintained no embassy in Paris, or anywhere.

To draw together many of the threads of the projection of the idea of France in Victoria, I would like to return to Louise Dyer, or Louise Smith as she was born, the daughter of a well-known parliamentarian and doctor, L.L. Smith. Louise was sent along to the *Alliance* at the age of eight by her mother – partly because it was the fashionable thing to do, and partly because L.L.'s mother had been French. So the language was occasionally spoken at meals; tuition given to the young girl by Irma Dreyfus, a friend of Sarah Bernhardt's; a sense of the French ambience assiduously maintained by travelling to Europe by Messageries Maritimes. Thus an English-born political figure of dubious reputation manipulated the French connection to increase his social standing. L.L.'s mother's distant relative, the Napoleonic General Gengoult, ineluctably became her father; eventually L.L.'s son, Louise's brother Hal, became known as Gengoult, and later, in full glory when thrice Lord Mayor of Melbourne, Sir Harold Gengoult-Smith. The other brother, Louis, died near Bapaume during the First World War. The wars, too, contributed much to the idea of France, particularly in the case of Louise Hanson-Dyer. To Louis she had been particularly close, and in the long run his death served to underscore her attachment to things French. Through the 1920s her interest in French music dramatically increased, and by 1930 her more pronounced one in British music had waned. Having moved to Paris, in 1932 she founded Editions de l'Oiseau-Lyre – the Lyrebird Press – and began by publishing all the works of the eighteenth century composer Couperin for what was then the very first time.

Louise Dyer's career illustrates the importance of the agency of the *Alliance* and other disseminators of the French language and culture; the way families with a French background often assiduously set about maintaining that connection, because of its attractive cosmopolitanism and social clout; the importance of World War I; and also the way the relationship between the two countries must be seen as interactive.

Finally, it must be said that since the French community was never numerically strong in Victoria, the importance of the French connection has been mainly a cultural one. 'Paris is the source of all art', wrote George Moore, one of Louise's favourite authors. While this can scarcely be said to be the case today, it does remain true that no other nation is so committed to high culture: a survey in the 1950s showed that 30% of insurance clerks and 20% of typists considered themselves as belonging to the intellectual class.² (The comparable Australian figures do not bear thinking about.) Culture is the essence of the idea of France; and, however unfashionable high culture may have now become

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both there and here, it would be true to say that the most effective challenge to the idea of France has been posited by ideas imported from France.

Melbourne

Notes

1. Quoted in Blainey, Geoffrey. *Our Side of the Country*, Melbourne, 1984, p. 130.
2. These figures are given in Theodore Zeldin. *France 1848-1945*, Oxford, 1977, vol. II, p. 1121.