

SELLING FRENCH BOOKS IN MELBOURNE DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

WALLACE KIRSOP

The document that occupies the twelve pages following this brief introduction was acquired by the author several years ago through the good offices of John Holroyd, that ever-generous helper of all who take an interest in the history of books in Australia. No other copy has yet been unearthed, but for reasons that are set out below it would be imprudent to suppose that this item is unique. Although the informed reader will have no difficulty in assessing what is revealed about the sorts of French books available to Melbourne buyers during the First World War, a minimal effort must be made to situate the list in its context.

The National Library of Australia's *Australian National Bibliography 1901-1950* states "Ephemeral material such as sales catalogues, price lists, broadsides and programs are excluded unless considered to be of particular interest or importance."¹ The exceptions are, as always, both numerous and welcome. However, the Melville & Mullen list is missing, as is much else that is essential to a history of bookselling and publishing in this country. A first desideratum is a comprehensive catalogue of these usually flimsy productions, following the model provided by Rosemary Polya's invaluable *Nineteenth Century Plant Nursery Catalogues of South-East Australia: a Bibliography*.² Since they are often not properly recorded in library holdings, it is important to search high and low for lists that are hidden in entries like "Pamphlets, various" and "Volume of catalogues". Experience of happy finds encourages optimism about the discovery of unsuspected caches in private and public collections.

The manuscript dating on the first page is plausible. In the absence of surviving archives for a firm that was merged with George Robertson and Company in the early 1920s to form Robertson and Mullens Limited, the only chance of greater precision lies in careful scanning of the book advertisement columns of *The Argus* for the war years. Even so it is not certain that this offering to a specialized audience will have been given prominence.

How exclusive a public was it that sought books in French or on France? Less so, one suspects, than is the case three quarters of a century later. Manifestly the reference on page 12 to F. I. Maurice-Carton's pedagogical journal *Le Français en Australie*³ indicates awareness of a then extensive secondary school market. Similarly, the dictionaries, phrase books and Bibles on pages 10 and 11 must have been destined in part for troops going to the Western Front. Otherwise one finds the mixture of classics and near-contemporary writers characteristic of the popular series produced early in this century. The failure of a writer like Stendhal to appear says more about the timidity of French publishers than about Australian taste. More interesting are the second-hand books on pages 7 to 9. One wonders who imported—and at what period—the broken set of Naigeon's edition of Diderot. Behind the frequent mutilations of French spellings lie the icons of that hegemonic French culture—classical, enlightened, Romantic and even realist—that affected the Australian élite no less than similar groups in the Northern Hemisphere. When the history of French-Australian relations between 1914 and 1918 comes to be written, this dimension must be present.

Monash University

Notes

1. Canberra, National Library of Australia, 1988, 4 volumes, I, p. vii.
2. Bundoora, La Trobe University Library, 1981 (La Trobe University Library, Library Publication n° 24).
3. The entry in Miriam Gilson and Jerzy Zubrzycki, *The Foreign-language Press in Australia 1848-1964* (Canberra, Australian National University Press, 1967, pp. 187-188) does not altogether elucidate a complex bibliographical history. Maurice-Carton's monographs are not listed in *ANB 1901-1950*.

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