

# APROPOS OF THE 1984 INTERVIEW WITH J. G. CORNELL

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I was very interested to read the interview with J. G. Cornell in the June 1992 number of *Explorations*, as it brought back so many memories to me of people, events and friends mentioned by Professor Cornell or brought to his mind by the interviewer, Dr Colin Nettelbeck.

Consequently, I was prompted to write down some of my memories relating to that time, particularly as they concern the Alliance Française and its members whom I knew. I felt I could adjust a few items about which Professor Cornell was unsure and perhaps enlarge on some of the people about whom he was questioned.

My remarks follow the interview text seriatim and incorporate some corrections to the spelling of the names as transmitted there. Page headings are given to help the reader find references in *Explorations*, n° 12.\*\*

## Pages 3 & 4

In an earlier and smaller Melbourne, Madame Gay's name, Albertine, was known by many people as it was unusual. A handsome woman, she told me she was born in Aix-les-Bains and had trained to be a singer. She had a great admiration for her husband's country, Switzerland, and often said with the carefully-pronounced vowels of one used to addressing hesitant speakers of French, "La Suisse est un petit pays modèle!" Heavy emphasis on the *accent grave*.

Also handsome, courteous, Monsieur Gay was a suitable partner for his wife in classical and comic roles.

Music was highly important in their family, and we were told Madame Gay had trained her daughter, Liliane, to sing, which she did in Alliance programmes, mainly *bergeronnettes* and attractive French art

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\*\* We are much indebted to Miss Colette Reddin, ONM, one of three life members of the Alliance Française de Melbourne, an active participant in its theatrical enterprises of the 1930s and a tireless worker for the French cause in Australia, for the additional information she has provided. Copyright, of course, is vested in her.

songs of the nineteenth century. Liliane did not act in plays, but if this symbolic figure was required, she was always chosen to don the costume of "Marianne". Before marrying Ken Stewart, a nephew, I believe, of the famed actress, Nellie Stewart, she appeared in some musical comedies for J. C. Williamson's and once toured New Zealand. Later, she sang regularly for A.B.C. Radio, particularly in the former excellent education programmes.

A wonderful cook of high-class French cuisine, Madame Gay had personal cookbooks that were treasures.

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Madame Marguerite Cockerton, who, with Madame Gay, dominated Alliance activities for decades, was born in the Charente. Her English husband, Walter Cockerton, trained for service in stately homes in England, and travelled to Australia in charge of a large staff appointed in England by the Chirnside family, one of whose properties was "Werribee Park". Later, he began one of the first French restaurants in Melbourne, then managed two exclusive guest-houses of a type that no longer exists: "Denham" in Hopetoun Road, Toorak, and "Shipleigh House" in South Yarra, where he and his wife resided for twenty-five years. My parents and I stayed in each for short periods, being favoured, as residents were mostly permanent. "Shipleigh House" was an occasional setting for Alliance functions, that is, a few lectures by outstanding French visitors, and, in the garden, a beautiful moonlit performance of the Neo-Ancient Greek *Dialogue au Soleil Couchant* by Pierre Louys and *Le Souper Blanc* by Edmond Rostand.

A gently-spoken, smiling man, Mr Cockerton much enjoyed his French connections, and in later years he studied French seriously and wore a navy beret. A devoted husband, he was always waiting at the wheel of his car after evenings when his wife toiled for the Alliance (rehearsing plays, for example), driving her to examinations in the country and so on.

Jean Studer, a Swiss and another Thespian mentioned by Professor Cornell, was a big man who worked at the Swiss Consulate and later became Consul of Switzerland in several posts abroad. Theatre was his passion and he threw himself with bounding energy into lengthy roles, like Scapin in *Les Fourberies de Scapin*, never needing a prompt

from the wings. As a contrast to the classical dramas and comedies staged by the Alliance, Studer founded a drama group, "Le Cercle Chantecler", where he directed contemporary plays of the "Boulevard" type in which Alliance players like myself appeared. He also attracted to his casts other young Melbourne men and women, and the "Cercle" had a good following. Productions were staged at the "Little Theatre" in South Yarra, also known as "St Chad's" from the name of the old church transformed into a tiny playhouse.

Before leaving Melbourne, Jean Studer married an Australian widow, Mrs Katherine Battle.

Monsieur René Vanderkelen was actually Honorary Consul-General for Belgium, succeeding his uncle, François Vanderkelen, in this role, his uncle having first arrived in Melbourne to represent Belgium in the great International Exhibition of 1880. Five generations of this family have since resided in Melbourne, Australians all, but with fond feelings for their Belgian background.

René Vanderkelen had been part of the first theatrical troupe of the Alliance before the First War. Tall, distinguished-looking, impeccably groomed, he usually had the role of an aristocrat and was an assiduous supporter of other Alliance activities. Once he became a highly effective President, with his wife he graciously presided over the "sauteries" that sometimes followed the numerous programmes at Kelvin Hall (later The Playbox), where members and friends in full evening-dress, floor-length gowns and tails, danced to the strains of a sprightly trio or quartet.

In another section of the text, Professor Cornell seems uncertain about Kelvin Hall as a setting for plays; but he is thinking of the large three-act plays for schools, like *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, which, despite regular evenings at Kelvin Hall, were certainly held in larger venues like "The Playhouse", later called "The Garrick Theatre", a lovely real theatre suitable for such ventures and situated near Prince's Bridge where the Mobil building is today.

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Monsieur René Turck, Consul of France, and his elegant wife lived in Melbourne for about ten years in the twenties, a long period for a Consul. My parents knew them and thought they represented France

sensationally well; and my French mother, Édith Reddin, spoke of the feeling of pride she had each time they made a formal entry into the ballroom at the Fourteenth of July Ball.

Apart from Consular duties, René Turck was very interested in decorative arts and his homes in Punt Road and Queens Road were filled with *objets d'art* of the first quality. Owing to their long stay here, the Turcks and their attractive daughter, Ninette, made many friends in Melbourne; and when I visited them in retirement in Paris in the 1950s, they asked news of many prominent Australians. Their Auteuil *appartement* was filled with treasures, and understandably, as a retirement job, Monsieur Turck worked a few days a week at a nearby Museum. I sometimes wear a gold brooch engraved with my name that Madame Turck brought to my mother in hospital after I was born.

(Incidentally, Alliance Française Balls took place at the St Kilda Town Hall and Masonic Hall, but for many years in the 1930s and 1940s they were held at the Lower Melbourne Town Hall. I attended many of them and well recall the "Farandole" mentioned by Professor Cornell that concluded festivities as well as the cold walk up the hill in Collins Street to waiting transport afterwards, as it usually was the coldest night of the year.)

Continuing this background picture of friends and colleagues active in the Alliance Française, Professor Cornell justly focuses on Mr and Mrs William Mortill. They were great friends of ours and told my parents they considered us their best friends. Mr Mortill was a character, a debonair, unusual man, often called a self-made man, who had a vast fount of knowledge, silvery hair, a pink-and-white skin and a bright, sophisticated twinkle in his vivid blue eyes.

It was through his wife, Lydia, a White Russian, that he had links with the Alliance. As with White Russians, her French was impeccable and she also had a wide-ranging culture. She had trained as a dancer in Egypt when her family left Russia during the troubles of 1905, her mother being an aristocrat. I have a photo of her as a dancer and some ballet notes.

In their mansion home in Hawthorn, the Mortills entertained a mixture of academics, artists, socialites, musicians, visiting famous musical celebrities, politicians; and on rare occasions, through the quietly-spoken unaffected hostess, dancers from the Ballets-Russes, who performed for guests freely into the night in the old panelled ballroom

with its musicians' gallery. The adjoining acres of garden edging the Yarra were also the scene for special events usually arranged here for a philanthropic cause.

This was one of the few Melbourne homes with an international art collection, mixing excellent Australian paintings with European "Salon" pictures purchased by its owners during their travels. Meldrum painted Lydia Mortill in her Russian headdress; and she and her husband were early supporters of Danila Vassilieff, when he arrived in Australia. "Bill" Mortill, as he was always called, was a connoisseur of Shakespeare, of food and wine, of music and botany. He was also an iconoclast and an avid racegoer, whose wife's "toilettes" were recorded in the press. She was happy with her Alliance connections and was friendly with Mrs Louise Dyer and Mrs Mireille Wilkinson, both mentioned in the Cornell interview. Unfortunately, Madame Mortill died young, actually falling ill during a short holiday she and my mother had in Healesville. Suffering a severe stroke, she could never communicate again and was two years in hospital before her death at forty-two.

Things were no longer the same. Her spouse continued to patronize the arts, kept up with friends, but without Lydia, whose pre-Revolution Russian changes of mood he so amusingly imitated, the glamour had passed. He sold his fine home and many possessions, and lived to the age of ninety-nine and three-quarters.

Mr and Mrs Guy Bakewell, regular guests at the Mortills' house, told me this couple were never replaced in Melbourne.

## Pages 15 & 16

"Dr Maurice Belz?" the interviewer Dr Colin Nettelbeck questions. Mrs Marjorie Belz told me her husband's name was Alsatian, but this origin was not close as his father had been born in Australia.

Professor Belz's and her sympathy for things and people French formed a lifetime enthusiasm, and French residents, visitors and Francophiles were lucky to enjoy the generous hospitality they offered. They had entertained me in their home since I was fifteen.

They supported the Alliance in the thirties; but, in the Second War, when the "France Combattante" Movement was founded, their energies were mainly devoted to it. After the War, when the Movement changed its guise to become the French-Australian Association, Maurice

Belz succeeded Professor A. R. Chisholm as President and remained so for twenty-five years. I was on his Committee for some time.

During his leadership, events that are now part of the French calendar in Melbourne were inaugurated, like the ceremony at the Statue of Joan of Arc in May, the annual Mass for the French community at St Patrick's Cathedral and various dinners and lunches. Overall, large receptions and dinners were organized at important city venues and Melbourne University where French celebrities were honoured: actors, musicians and singers, French naval officers, scientists on their way to the Antarctic, Parisian mannequins. The Association had more of a social ambiance than the Alliance; and although most members spoke French, this was not obligatory.

Considering Professor Belz, who had the first Chair of Statistics at Melbourne University, and his wife, a doctor and practising anaesthetist, had busy professional lives, it was amazing what they succeeded in doing for the cause of "la belle France". Drawing on their vast range of friends and acquaintances, they encouraged new guests to attend functions. Committee members too brought in admirers of French culture. But when acceptances were slow in coming for an Association event, no one was more adept than they at speedily filling a concert hall, cultural evening or cocktail party.

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Athol Wilson was another cheerful and wise Francophile. A lawyer, he was a junior partner in the well-known firm of Sir Arthur Robinson & Co. His French was poor, but he was satisfied to take walk-on roles in plays; and I remember him in turban and Turkish costume sitting cross-legged on the stage in the ballet in *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*.

He was a genial chauffeur to Alliance guests and friends on French occasions. As well, in his pleasant social life when he arranged parties to attend balls and dances, his groups sometimes became French-Australian. I was included in these evenings and became a friend. A dab hand at photography, Athol Wilson recorded French-orientated outings, including a large picnic at Mount Donna Buang to honour Henri Cochet, about whom a great fuss was made and of which I have some snaps. True to his ancestry, Athol began evenings of Scottish dancing in his large flat in Marne Street, which luckily was on the ground floor. A new

activity to me, in a Melbourne then totally devoid of central heating, it was a good way to keep warm in winter.

A member of the Army Reserve, Athol Wilson joined the 2nd A.I.F. in time of war, and the last time I saw him was in Collins Street, in uniform and a major, before embarking for overseas. In 1942, he was posted "Killed in Action", and we heard he had drowned in the seas near Timor, after the sinking of his ship. I always think of Athol on Anzac Day, together with other young men who did not return from war, one or two of whom I had met at the Alliance.

H. B. Perry's given name was Harold; and he appeared in many Alliance plays and in "Le Cercle Chantecler". Dark, quietly-spoken and bilingual, he had a father who had been highly successful in the Lane, in textiles I think, and who was English and a mother who was Swiss. With a commerce degree from Melbourne University, Harold Perry became an executive with a large manufacturing company, but later would certainly have formed other interests. As did most of the people I describe, he had a good general culture.

His family built a beautiful house only a short distance from ours in Toorak. "Old English" in style, it enjoyed the same attractive views, and I went to some happy parties there. Our own house was "Old French", although the idea and exterior design at least were those of my architect uncle, Hugh Peck, and not of my French mother. I heard Harold Perry died some years ago.

## Pages 18 & 19

In this interview, there were misspellings of several names that I have corrected while writing. Professor Cornell may not have recalled exact versions, but, anyway, there are no rules for names.

With reference to one on this page, Macmahon should be spelt as one word. Later Professor W. Macmahon Ball, Mac Ball as he was known then, directed the A.B.C. Shortwave Division, the first to broadcast outside Australia and to which Professor Cornell was a regular contributor. He alludes to Grace Martin, a journalist and former student and friend, later Mrs Myles (another adjusted spelling), who had charge of the French Section of the Shortwave Division, broadcasting to New Caledonia, Tahiti and Indo-China. I prepared my first scripts for overseas broadcasts for her.

Apart from her professional interests, Grace Myles is still active today on the French scene, notably for the French-Australian Association. A founding member, in the last years as its Organizing Secretary, she has been a stalwart of the society assisting in all fixed events on its calendar; and, with the support of the President, former senior Australian diplomat, Noël Deschamps, and with the help of Miss Anne England, has carried out the gargantuan task of arranging the most recent addition to its programme, the annual French Race Day at Pakenham Racecourse, where French industry and business interests offer prizes to race winners, the Tricolor flies over the Members' Stand and Francophones picnic in the grounds.

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Frances Barkman, spelt with a "k".

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"A. Pullman?"

Because of the initial and different spelling of the surname, this is probably not Dr John Poolman, who was President of the French-Australian Association for fourteen years until 1986. Dr Poolman belonged to a prominent Melbourne family, and was approached to succeed Professor Belz when he retired as President of the Association. He had learnt French while at school in Switzerland, as did his sister Audrey (Mrs Ian Mann), who in the 1930s had close contacts with the Alliance Française and was a great favourite of Mme Cockerton.

During his chairmanship, monthly lunches at "The Australia", to which Professor Cornell refers, were at their zenith, made interesting by excellent speakers. I remember visits Jim Cornell made there; and we always enjoyed seeing him because of his charming, sunny personality and the happy memories these visits evoked.

Dr and Mrs Poolman often received members and friends in their beautiful house, and through him, we also had use of "Poolman House" in South Yarra, a former home, for meetings or cocktail parties in the ballroom. The Alliance Française and the French-Australian Association occasionally shared a function.



Dr Poolman died only a short while ago after a dreadful accident; and it is only then members of the French community learnt about the wonderful work he did for decades for drug addicts, for war veterans and their families and other disadvantaged people. His teasing and provocative personality hid great kindness and dedication.

### **Pages 24 & 25**

Two name corrections: Paul Bibron, an identity in greater Melbourne, whose attractive establishment was a mecca for generations of ballroom dancers and Katherine Ball, spelt with a "K", wife of Professor Macmahon Ball, a fine woman who died recently.

Mireille Wilkinson was an ornament to the French community. Highly cultured and attractive, she was of Basque aristocratic background and had unusual features with very high cheek bones, large blue eyes and fair hair worn in an enormous bun and a mannequin's figure. She had a gift for friendship and was highly popular during her stay in Melbourne, was admired by artists and was my mother's best friend. Her brother, Marc de Civrieux, was a promising poet who was killed in the First War.

H. Lance Wilkinson, her husband, was a brainy mining engineer and economist, and his writings on economics were used in the Economics Department at Melbourne University. The family left Melbourne to live in New York in the mid-thirties; to Mr Wilkinson the New York Stock Exchange proved more interesting than its Melbourne counterpart.

We were always in touch with Mireille. I stayed in New York with her after her husband's death, and visited her in Paris and met many of her charming and talented friends. Her eldest son, Marc, is a composer and for ten years was Musical Director for Sir Laurence Olivier's National Theatre; his brother, François, was an economist and junior professor at Harvard University. I have many photographs of her.

My mother and she corresponded regularly and she died in France about eighteen months ago. She studied singing seriously and sang for the Alliance and also wore stunning gowns.

Nellie Lambert (Mrs Meier) was Raymond Lambert's sister. Her whole family were musicians, and I remember her singing for a

programme I arranged when President of the Alliance's first and only Cercle de Jeunesse in 1945.

Monsieur André Cau was a leading French woolbuyer, who died a few years ago. His wife, Marguerite Cau, was a very active Alliance member, acting in plays, and so on.

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Professor Cornell recalls with great pleasure, and justifiably so, another woolbuying family, Émile and Gilberte Gaillet. Enthusiastic Alliance supporters, they joined in all the society's activities. Madame Gaillet, who was beautiful, very dark with beautiful dark eyes, usually played the role of an aristocrat or fine lady; she also recited poems with genuine feeling and perfect diction.

A voluble, harmonious couple, they showed interest in everything around them, and were much travelled. Their stay in Adelaide followed the awful experience many French woolbuyers had of being called up to fight in Indo-China and of spending war years there under occupation.

Back in Melbourne, their lively course continued. Monsieur Gaillet was particularly enlightening about his profession; and I interviewed him several times for A.B.C. programmes.

Old friends of ours, they eventually returned to France, living in a house they had outside Paris, later settling on a property in the Creuse.

*Melbourne*