

# BEYOND A CLOISTERED EUROPE: UNIVERSITIES AND THE FRENCH REDISCOVERY OF AUSTRALIA

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The French discovery of Australia goes back as far as the explorers La Pérouse, who almost dead-headed with the First Fleet when he arrived in Botany Bay on 24 January 1788, and Baudin. The continuing interest in France in the history of French exploration is one of several gateways to increased French awareness of the wider world. It is one of several reflections of a more outward-looking France, which looks beyond Europe and the Francophonie and in which countries like Australia register at least as highly in French consciousness as La Réunion or Haiti.

The rediscovery of Australia has been multi-faceted and recent. The French view that Australia was an extension of Britain long persisted from the time when Napoleon ordered the governor of Mauritius to take the English colony at Port Jackson in 1810. Traditional perspectives ensured, even as Australia changed after World War II, that Australia was seen merely as an English colony, an outdated view which was perhaps reinforced by the Anglophilia of Robert Menzies and Australia's continuing constitutional situation as a monarchy with an English monarch.<sup>1</sup>

The academic exploration of Australia began as part of the French, and European, discovery of Commonwealth literature, particularly in the MA course on "Commonwealth literature and civilization" initiated by Professor V. Dupont at Toulouse in 1968. This was already part of a French opening-out as English departments discovered that there was an interesting Commonwealth literature and Commonwealth history which might be pursued as well as the staples associated with England and America. Professor Dupont was also involved in a second broadening-out, the expansion of "civilization" courses in English departments in French universities; at Toulouse then the subject was Australasia—Australia and New Zealand—as it is today at the Sorbonne Nouvelle III. As inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary approaches were becoming more common in Australia, in France, under the banner of "civilization", it was now possible to study the relationship

between economics, politics, society and the arts, to seek to understand a culture. Sometimes this begins with basic information seeking to challenge the exotic image of Australia as a land of "cuddly animals, a never-ending summer, desert . . . [a land] of exoticism and adventure."<sup>2</sup> Some students still expect that kangaroos will be found in the main streets and do not realize (partly because of the Eurocentric or northern hemisphere deceptions of Mercator's projection map of the world) that Australia is a continent fourteen times the size of France; or, as one French academic puts it, about the same size as the United States if you leave out Alaska.

However the predominant focus of Australian studies in French universities stemmed from its origins in English and language departments. The inevitable beginning is language and literature partly because the books, however few, however late, however inadequate, are more readily available than other sources and academic journals. The Patrick White industry, given scholarly legitimacy by his 1973 Nobel Prize, was the beginning of the career of many a scholar and still attracts graduate students. However there is a need to combat the view expressed by the opponents of the study of the new literature that "if it's not Dickens or Wordsworth it's not worth doing". By this logic (also used by some traditionalists in Australia) a writer usually needs to be dead and English to be worth considering. Often underlying the scepticism is the assumption that "if I don't know about it, it either doesn't exist or isn't worth studying". Another academic remarked that some colleagues ask whether Australia has any culture or any history. It is easy to condemn the assumption that views based on ignorance are wisdom rather than folly. However it is also salutary to reflect that Australia had not done very much to tell the world that it does have a culture and a history until recently.

The elaboration of the study of Australia has mainly occurred in the last ten to fifteen years. The conference "Australia and Continental Europe" held in Paris in 1982, organized by Prof. Michel Fabre of the Sorbonne Nouvelle III, might be seen as a turning point, a marker which suggested that Australia was a subject of interest for French and European universities. The academic discovery of Australia paralleled Australia's appearance on the symbolic map of the world in other ways: the 1983 America's Cup, the discovery by French adolescents of Australian rock music (from INXS to Midnight Oil and Yothu Yindi) and

the renaissance of the Australian film industry. It also preceded the impact of Aboriginal art, dance and music in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The translation of Australian writers (Marcus Clarke, Frank Moorhouse, Peter Corris, Brian Castro and Elizabeth Jolley) is part of this process and particularly relevant to students of Australian literature.

Courses in aspects of Australian civilization from economics to literature are now found in universities from Nice to Le Havre and from Toulouse to Dijon. In Britain, except for the Sir Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies at the University of London, there is a relative lack of interest in Australia in the golden triangle (London, Oxford, Cambridge). In contrast there is a degree of interest in Paris as well as in the provinces: at the Sorbonne Nouvelle III and the Centre d'Etudes et de Recherche Internationale (CERI), Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques.

The developments in literature and civilization need to be qualified. First, Australian interests are often confined to a semester course (or two), a few writers in Commonwealth or post-colonial literature courses, graduate supervision and research. Second, the craft and science of teaching the English language occupy a major position and call for dedication and care; here Australian press clippings and videos can be as important as books. (At another level this noble pursuit can be reduced to a chore in the form of service teaching for legions of science and economics students in under-resourced universities.)

The pessimistic realist who sees a glass half empty (rather than the optimist's glass half full) recognizes the limitations of the situation of Australian studies overseas: the few isolated individuals in different institutions and the consequent lack of long-term guarantees of development. In Xavier Pons' summary:

the few pockets of Australian studies [in France] are indeed islands in the ocean, holding their own against the tide, but aware of their frailty and isolation with regard to the vast expanse where the Anglo-American canon holds sway.<sup>3</sup>

In France, as has happened in some other countries, the movement of an individual may lead to the disappearance of interest in Australia within an institution. Unless the library of Australian books is private, moving

with the individual, it may remain, unappreciated, in the former institution.

More positively, the elaboration of activity has led to organizations and conferences as well as to undergraduate courses and graduate research. The Centre Européen d'Etudes Australiennes (CEEA) created by Maryvonne Nedjelkovic has held conferences on trade and international relations while David Camroux (CERI) has convened conferences on international relations and contemporary Australian politics.

The legacy of the traditional French view is that Australia has been taught within courses on British and Commonwealth history. Today, however, Australia is also being discovered in a regional rather than an ethnic context. Courses and conferences on Australia and the Pacific or the Asia/Pacific region have become important. In 1993 I lectured for Maryvonne Nedjelkovic at the Université du Havre on the subject of Australian international and trade policy at the time of discussions about finalizing the GATT treaty, with particular reference to Australia's role in APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Council).

Relevant here was the current debate about "l'exception culturelle", the question of excluding cultural products from the GATT reduction of subsidies and trade barriers. One of the points discussed was the Australian paradox. While many creators and cultural nationalists, who had seen the growth of Australian film, publishing and television industries with the aid of government subsidies and quotas, supported a policy of cultural exception, perhaps Reg Grundy (who brings through *Les Productions Grundy* France's most popular game shows to French television) and Rupert Murdoch (the owner of Sky and Fox television and now an American citizen) might disagree.

A growing intellectual and political awareness of contemporary Australian developments relevant to French society suggests new possibilities in applied research. Australia, under the banner of multiculturalism, has successfully integrated a diverse immigrant population into a tolerant society. At the same time it needs to come to terms with its colonial past, with Aboriginal Australia, two centuries after 1788. Today, in these recessionary times, France feels increasingly uncomfortable with another legacy of imperialism—immigration from the former colonies. Despite the myriad of "foreign names" which are now thought of as French (Balladur, Beregovoy and Platini), reflecting

successful integration over the centuries, France has not yet come to terms with contemporary ways of ensuring tolerance and allowing for a slow process of integration. Here the Australian experience is helpful. The November 1993 *Le Monde des Débats* addressed the subject of Australian multiculturalism, a policy which has facilitated integration while preaching tolerance and diversity. Misconceptions have not departed entirely: a *Le Monde* TV guide article erroneously described SBS TV, which has an internationally-oriented professional audience, as television by foreigners and for foreigners.

The French interest in Australia has generated important research. Books include Robert Lacour-Gayet's *Histoire de l'Australie* (1973), Xavier Pons' Lawson study *Out of Eden* (1984), his *Le Géant du Pacifique* (1988), and the new *A Sheltered Land* (1994); and the conference papers *Australia and Continental Europe (Commonwealth, 1984)*, Maryvonne Nedjelkovic and André Dommergues, eds, *Les Français et l'Australie: Voyages, découvertes et missions scientifiques de 1756 à nos jours* (1989). Parallel interests have evolved in Australia: important studies of the explorers; the work of the French Australian Research Centre at the University of New South Wales and the book arising from its conference: Anne-Marie Nisbet and Maurice Blackburn, eds, *The French-Australian Connection* (1984); and in Victoria the Institute for the Study of French Australian Relations (ISFAR), with its magazine *Explorations* and the book, which makes some Australian comparisons: Stephen Alomes and Michael Provis, eds, *A Changing France in a Changing World* (1994).

In France, also relevant is the work of Jean-Paul Delamotte and his Association Culturelle Franco-Australienne (founded in 1980) in publishing, translating and in the dubbing of films; it also serves as a cultural *carrefour*, a crossroads introducing Australian writers and artists to French counterparts. Given the role of the Australia France Foundation in supporting Australian culture in France (for example, the new translation prize, won in 1993 by Françoise Cartano for her translation of Elizabeth Jolley's *The Sugar Mother*), some staff and student exchanges and the recent visit of Professor Brian Matthews to several French universities, perhaps a new stage is already emerging. The archipelago of Australian studies in France may need bridges between the "islands in the ocean" in the form of either a working party

or even an association as has happened in several major European countries. But such a development would be facilitated by greater assistance with resources, particularly books, from Australia.

French study of Australia is also entering a higher stage of development. In an era of cultural and social change, and when the formation of supra-national entities raises fundamental questions of national identity, comparative questions regarding Australian experience are being asked by French scholars. Although the subjects of research and teaching are Australian, the impetus behind them is in part French. In this new phase Australia is, slowly but surely, moving from being an exotic subject (so distant, so large and so strange) to a fascinating New World society which can teach as well as learn from the "Old World". In a later stage more academic researchers in other fields (politics, economics, sociology, environmental planning, geography) will be deepening French knowledge of Australia.

The phenomenal increase in European academic and popular interest in Australia is important despite the reorientations resulting from the EC and despite Australia's focus on the growing Asia/Pacific region. Economically, Western Europe is about one third of the developed world and remains important for capital and for technological innovation. The academic interest in Australia ensures—through books, conferences, feature articles in newspapers and advice to government—that Australia is better understood in France and in Europe. In 1994 the French rediscovery of Australia is in its early days and is still advancing.

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#### Notes

1. On French perceptions of Australia see: Mary de Jabrun, "French Adolescents' Perceptions of Australia" in Don Grant and Graham Seal, eds, *Australia in the World*, Perth, Black Swan Press, 1994; Stephen Alomes, "A Distorting Lens? Australian Perceptions of France and of the French" in Anne-Marie Nisbet and Maurice Blackman, eds, *The French-Australian Cultural Connection*, Sydney, School of French, University of New South Wales, 1984.
2. A. Grutzner, "Things Australian are now the rage in Paris", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20/7/1989.

3. Xavier Pons, "Islands in the Ocean", *Australian Studies*, n° 17, April 1992, p. 64. On the expansion of Australian studies overseas and Australian government support for it within the context of Australian cultural and foreign policy, see A. Lohrey, comp., *Australian Studies Overseas: A Guide*, Canberra, AGPS, 1988; *International Directory of Australian Studies*, Clayton, National Centre for Australian Studies, Monash University, 1992; and Grant and Seal, op. cit.