

FOREWORD

The present issue of *Explorations* can be regarded as the first instalment of our long-promised treatment of the fascinating group of French consuls appointed to the Australian colonies in the second half of the nineteenth century. Subsequent numbers will pick up other figures or aspects of their work in Melbourne or Sydney. The documentary basis is provided essentially by the material discussed in Colin Nettelbeck's article "The Consul's Treasure" (*Explorations*, n° 7, December 1988, pp. 18-23).

On one level what we shall be presenting looks like *la petite histoire* pushed to an extreme. Records of meetings, of banal correspondence and of parochial quarrels do not on the surface promise an engagement with the grand themes of Australia's past. And yet . . . For anyone familiar with the petty politics of Van Diemen's Land in the 1840s there will be reminders of the propensity of human beings to fall into rancour and discord. In the real Australia, as opposed to the marvellous Antipodean realm of fancy, Micawbers did not become thrifty nor misfits find their equilibrium. This was no *tabula rasa* on which harmony and concord could be inscribed afresh. Clientelism, party, faction, cabal and all the rest are part of our political vocabulary too. The misadventures of Paul Maistre underline the simple truth that Australians in the 1890s or in the 1990s need to be approached with awareness of the complex traditions in which their social and intellectual pursuits are embedded.

W. K.