

BOOK REVIEWS

Jacqueline Dwyer, *Flanders in Australia - A Personal History of Wool and War*, East Roseville NSW: Kangaroo Press, 1998, ISBN 0 86417 969 3

This book began in 1983 when Jacqueline Dwyer was given a diary and a bundle of family letters written mainly by her father, Jacques Playoust, in the trenches during the 1914-1918 Great War. Having typed these out she resolved to widen the picture by describing the wool-buyers' world to which he belonged. This resulted in what she calls 'a very personal or skewed viewpoint of the Great War with the emphasis fixed on the Western Front and the involvement in it of one family.' She is too modest: she has written a remarkable book.

Her father was a French wool-buyer whose family had come to Melbourne in 1889 to set up an office for the Tourcoing wool broking firm of Henri Cauillez. As a French citizen he was called up at the outbreak of the Great War in August 1914. He left for Marseilles 18 days later.

I have been looking for the right point of view to convey the quality of his daughter's re-creation of his life and times. My grandfather, a stockman and sheep-station owner in Central Queensland would have liked the section dealing with the history of the wool trade in Australia. His own concerns were immediate, dealing with the round of droughts, in which he detected an 11-year cycle. He also swore by In(d)igo Jones' sun-spot predictions. As a classer for his neighbour's wool as well as his own he would have been interested in the current switch to sale by sample and computer print-out of wool quality. His own way was to splay the wool on the shoulders of sheep to show the colour, fibre length and thickness, the degree of crimping and a mysterious element called the 'yolk' (impurities). As for the wool-buyers they were a bunch from overseas whom he never saw but whose bids at auctions fixed the size of his cheque for his wool-clip. He would have known little of their life. Jacqueline's description of the wool-buyers' world encompasses the 'little known movement of people to Australia with its origins in the wool-trade. These were 'not immigrants but self-supporting business expatriates'. They were almost cocooned as a group. Their children went to the best schools and they had a vigorous social life. As 'les cousins Kangourous' they visited France regularly. The foreign wool-buyers kept together as a group, visiting the wool-auctions in Melbourne and Sydney. The noisy auctions are evoked, including the Japanese buyers bidding in high-pitched shrieks.

In the personal history of Jacques Playoust, Jacqueline's father, my grandfather would have compared his own son George's departure to the Middle East as a Lighthouseman. George, of the haunted eyes and deep wheeze, had also seen action in Flanders. He was gassed but on his return from 'over there' he was still able to take up cotton farming on a soldiers' settlement. George's point of view would have been the best for comment on the laconic letters Jacques wrote to his family. Jacques was a poilu [private] in signals, a téléphoniste, using the newish invention of the telephone. Here are some extracts:

13 Nov. 1915

...I'm afraid it will be some time before the North is rid from the Germans...after our last attack, we advanced t'is true & took prisoners but not without enormous losses. We are going to win... It will not be a brilliant victory but by usure [attrition].

Winter has started. It is cold and it snowed all the morning...

7 Jan. 1916

...We are lodged in barns and stables [10km from The Front]. My billet is one of the latter, well-aired, there are holes on all sides. Still the 'Totos' [lice] are less terrible. These good little beasts don't care much for manure...

10 May 1916

...during the riposte [German counter-attack] in the afternoon a 150 [mm shell] falls at the entrance to my gourbi [dugout] and imprison me for 3 hours, my instrument [telephone] untouched and we are still able to operate from inside...

12 May 1916

...a shell fell at the entrance to our post. Killed 3 telephone men, 2 signallers and 3 others, upset all our sap. Everything disorganised but what a fearful thing this war is. Men in the prime of life are butchered what for? All peace-loving men they were. Such situations drive one mad little by little & as for the nerves!!! The wind is in favour of the Germans & the stench of the dead come over our lines. How many corpses between [word omitted] how many still buried in the saps...

Such letters underline the horrors which official histories and statistics conceal.

It is fortunate that the author is an adept historian. She has the curiosity and the persistence to assemble the total picture, from contemporary reporting in *L'Illustration*, the *Courrier Australien*, War Diaries, and a range of secondary sources. The personal history is embedded in the overall text.

We are informed of the strategies of both sides as well as the main battles. General Pétain is shown in his early glory days as the hero who sorted out the chaos of Verdun. The British Generals who sent the first volunteer divisions over the parapet in tight formation against the machine-guns (shades of Crimea) are called to account for the 20 000 dead in one day. There were lesser slaughters such as the 700 men of the Newfoundland Regiment, killed in 30 minutes.

The influence of the regional geology is mentioned. The chalky nature of the Cretaceous deposits across France made the trench system possible – all 700km of it. The Germans held up at Champagne pioneered the expert construction of systematic trench systems. They also designed the first *trommelfeuer*, a deluge of fire on the 24km Verdun front. It consisted of 13 of Krupp's 'Big Berthas', 2 long-range naval guns, 17 300 mortars, a lavish distribution of field guns, and flame-throwers. The dissertation on military service since the 1870 Franco-Prussian War shows how in 1914 there came to be millions of trained soldiers on both sides. There were anomalies: in 1914 the French Army uniform was navy great-coat and scarlet pantaloons, soon changed to *bleu horizon*; there were no steel helmets until 1915, so the *poilus* improvised by hacking their mess tins to get some protection in their caps.

In 1917 Jacques, now with a *Croix de Guerre*, was allowed furlough (to Australia!). His ship, the *SS Magnolia*, was sunk by a mine off the Indian coast but he rowed ashore unharmed. On his return to France he became an interpreter with the 13th Field Artillery Brigade, 5th Division, A.I.F. Using the War Diaries the author gives a clear summary of the influence of General Monash in the co-ordination of all arms in attack, creeping barrages, air cover, leap-frogging of whole divisions with the overall objective of minimum loss of men.

The rest of the book follows the post-Great War vicissitudes of the Playoust clan in Australia and a rapid sketch of World War II. The dilemma of the French in Australia – Pétain or de Gaulle? is dramatically reported. The decline of the wool trade is observed succinctly: 'the improvement in synthetic fibres, which involved only three procedures to produce a fibre, became a real threat to wool which required nineteen'.

Not only will the Playoust generations appreciate this 'personal history of wool and war' but the descendants of other French and Belgian wool-buyers who settled in Australia. It is also a source book for those tracing the

French presence in Australia. It confirms the bonds of French-Australian experiences over a torrid century. For those who hate war this will be a solemn reminder.

Jacqueline Dwyer's voice deserves to be heard.

Ken Bradshaw

U3A

Patricia Clancy & Jeanne Allen (ed. & trans.), *The French Consul's Wife: Memoirs of Céleste de Chabrillan in gold-rush Australia*, Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press of Melbourne University Press, 1998, pp. 304, notes, illustrations, appendices, bibliography and index, ISBN 0 522 84775 7, RRP \$49-95

These marvellous memoirs, published for the first time in English, evoke Cinderella or Pygmalion rendered as a tragic love story. Born in 1824, the illegitimate daughter of an impoverished milliner, Céleste Vénard was apprenticed as an embroiderer at the age of eleven before drifting into prostitution. Beautiful and intelligent, her misfortune was tempered by employment in a brothel frequented by the Parisian elite - including the poet Alfred de Musset. Drawn to the stage, she performed as a dancer at the Beaumarchais Theatre and then as a bareback rider and charioteer at the Hippodrome under the stage name 'Mogador'. A Parisian celebrity, Céleste was mistress to a succession of European noblemen, before forming a lasting relationship with Count Lionel de Moreton de Chabrillan.

De Chabrillan belonged to one of the most illustrious aristocratic families in the Dauphiné, but his gambling debts barely covered his vast inheritance, so he tried his luck on the Victorian gold fields in 1852. He returned to France in 1853, having failed to strike it lucky, but soon gained appointment as the new French consul in Melbourne. Céleste had apparently declined his initial proposal of marriage, but ultimately agreed to accompany him back to Melbourne as his wife. They were married in England shortly before embarking on the *Croesus*. Céleste would no doubt have made a fairly effortless transition from courtesan to countess in the Antipodes, had she not written a revealing memoir of her earlier life. With the aid of a cousin of Emperor Napoléon III, she later succeeded in having her name removed from the register of prostitutes kept by the prefecture of police, but she was unable to recover her manuscript from her publisher - who knew a best seller when he saw it! The scandal would follow her to Melbourne where she would endure snubs and censure from the Melbourne

establishment for the duration of her stay. These experiences would form the basis for yet another memoir *Un deuil au bout du monde* [Death at the End of the World] (1877) and other literary works which would include *Les voleurs d'or* [*The Gold Robbers*] (1857), eleven other novels, twenty-six plays, seven operettas, twelve poems and seventeen songs.

Céleste de Chabrilan's account of gold rush Victoria is particularly valuable because there are very few accounts of the gold rush by women. Because she writes as the wife of the French consul, she offers a very different cultural perspective from the reminiscences of Ellen Clacy, Elizabeth Ramsay-Laye, Louisa Anne Meredith or Emily Skinner. Although she has little affection for Victoria, she writes with warmth, compassion and humility - qualities distinctly absent from the haughty prose of some of her contemporary colonial diarists. She is not ashamed, for example, to recount her husband's financial reverses and the sale of the contents of her home to meet his speculative debts. Céleste and Lionel lived in Collingwood and then St Kilda. In the 1850s both these suburbs were on the wooded fringes of the city. Nevertheless, Céleste's experiences in Australia are essentially urban. Although an accomplished horsewoman (no doubt thanks to her days at the Hippodrome), Céleste was never comfortable when she ventured into the Australian bush and her prose contains few observations on the natural splendours which surrounded her. Furthermore, she has few kind words for the Aborigines.

Céleste did not recount the privations of the diggings as a participant observer as did Emily Skinner (whose memoirs I had the honour to edit in 1995). Her home was simple, but she did not live in a bark hut or baize-lined tent. Her husband was improvident, but she did not have to feed a large brood of children or earn supplementary income through dressmaking, washing and ironing. When she returned to France she travelled first class. Despite her humble origins and grievances against Melbourne 'Society', she neither displays fundamental sympathy for the miners suffering the injustices of the undemocratic colonial administration, nor makes mention of her husband's role in attempting to dissuade French diggers from supporting the Eureka rebellion. (Clancy and Allen, however, have included a photograph of his famous proclamation.) Céleste is relieved at the end of the troubles, but seems to have more pity for Governor Hotham than the fallen diggers. Céleste de Chabrilan's memoirs, nevertheless, are the engaging product of a natural storyteller who captured a great deal of the ebb and flow of life around her. As the wife of the French consul she met many individuals who came to her husband for help after all manner of misfortune and adversity. In his pastoral role among the expatriate French, Lionel de Moreton de Chabrilan emerges as a generous, kindly and honourable soul. He would die in Melbourne on 29 December 1858, aged only 40 years, from the effects of chronic dysentery probably contracted in Aden. There is

genuine pathos in his lonely end - far from his beloved wife, who had returned to France in an attempt to put their finances in order.

Céleste de Chabrilan's prose has been beautifully translated by Patricia Clancy and Jeanne Allen. Their elegant translation has been further enriched by a very well-researched introduction, copious scholarly notes and well-chosen appendices and illustrations. (The suggestion, in the epilogue, that Céleste may have inspired Bizet's *Carmen* is tantalizing!) Along with Antoine Fauchery's charming *Letters from a Miner in Australia*, these memoirs are destined to remain an important source of knowledge of the French experience of the gold rush.

Edward Duyker

Sylvania, New South Wales