

# **CALVÉ IN AUSTRALIA**

## **BY BRYAL STEWART**

From his unpublished manuscript  
'THREE EMMAS IN THE TIME OF JEAN DE RESZKE'  
Narrative text © Bryal Stewart 2000

### **BACKGROUND**

While the woman was fascinating, the dramatic aspect of her art, which critics came to call genius, was protracted in its manifestation. Born Rosa-Noémie de Roquer at Decazeville in the district of Aveyron, Southern France, on August 15, 1858, her father's occupation took the family to Spain when she was three. Young as she was, the child absorbed something of the temperament and atmosphere of Spain during a time of political ferment in the cause of Don Carlos. On return to France seven years later, and speaking only Spanish, she was enrolled in a Catholic convent at Millau (50 miles from Decazeville) under the name of Rosa Emma Calvert.

As she struggled to relearn her native tongue she became intent on becoming a nun. This did not prevent her, however, from frightening the other girls with fiendish stories for which she would provide horrible sound effects, such as shrieks and ghostly wails; the more terrified the girls became the greater her delight. After it became apparent that she had a singing voice out of the ordinary, her impecunious but determined mother took her to Paris where in 1873 Jules Puget agreed to teach her on promise of future payment should she be successful.

Three years' tuition in Paris found her an attractive young woman experiencing her first disappointment in love, and a further few years still struggling to find professional engagements. But she persevered, and finally made her operatic debut in Gounod's *Faust* at the Théâtre de la Monnaie, Brussels, on September 23, 1882. The directors were well pleased with her Marguerite and she was at first happy to have them use her for whatever productions they wished. However the primitive courage of childhood had long deserted her and she had become very inhibited on stage. During her second year in Brussels she realised that not only had there been no real development but she was being praised more for her innocent youthful appearance than her singing. So, on a visit to Paris, she sang for Mathilde Marchesi, the noted teacher. Mme Marchesi found Emma's voice tired, even overworn, and recommended rest followed by a period of remedial exercises under her guidance.



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CALVÉ as Salomé in Massenet's Hérodiade  
(Photo : Cautin and Berger – author's collection)

The following year, 1885, due to Mme Marchesi's influence, Emma signed a two-year contract with the Opéra Comique, where "her success was excellent, though not sensational ... a perfect but cold singer ... (and Marchesi) strove in vain to infuse more blood and feeling into her interpretations."<sup>1</sup>

## ITALY

The teacher's counsel was for Emma to move on and experience the rough and tumble of an opera singer's life in Italy, arranging for her to make her Italian debut with no less a company than La Scala. All to little avail. In Emma's words, "The seasons at the Opéra Comique had taught me nothing. I had acquired, it seems, a new timidity which paralysed my faculties ... in spite of the burning fires within me ... The night of my La Scala debut I was horribly frightened. I sang out of time and lost my head completely. The audience hissed me, and quite rightly."<sup>2</sup>

It was in Italy that Emma experienced the deepest romantic passion of her life. When the affair ended it all but destroyed her. Thwarted in her attempt to take her own life, she had a breakdown. Recuperating after an operation in a Milan nursing home run by nuns, Emma's febrile mind kept thinking of the great tragédienne Eleanora Duse's moving performance in Verga's dramatic play *Cavalleria Rusticana* which Mascagni had recently used as the basis for his latest opera. Emma had been studying the music of Santuzza at the time of her breakdown and now, newly blessed with insight, she felt herself perceiving the drama's operatic possibilities.

Returning to Paris Emma paid a visit to l'École Marchesi and told of how she had gone over the role of Santuzza a thousand times in her mind and discovered the key to unlock the barrier between her and the audience. Marchesi listened with patience but nothing had come of her previous efforts to help in this regard. Emma cheerfully accepted the teacher's good wishes and they parted on the best of terms.

Next on Calvé's visiting list was Madame Labord. Ever the dreamer, Emma felt a certain rapport with this teacher as she listened to stories of earlier generations of gifted singers. When Rosine Labord retold Malibran's story of how Henriette Sontag, the greatest soprano of her day, had early on been a quite indifferent artist, and that her art emerged only after she had endured a period of deep

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1 Marchesi, Blanche: *A Singer's Pilgrimage*, London, Grant Richards, 1923.

2 Calvé, Emma: *My Life*, New York, D. Appleton, 1922.

suffering, Emma felt her own past adversity at last making some sense. With her new teacher she set about critically reviewing and reinterpreting her roles.

## RECOGNITION

Back again in Milan, Emma auditioned for La Scala's 1890 production of Thomas's *Hamlet*, even though she felt in no way ready to withstand a repetition of the jeers and hisses that had so hurt her. A stubborn streak reasoned that since the vociferous audiences of rival San Carlo Opera House in Naples had previously hailed her half developed Ophelia, those of La Scala may decide to hate it. So she decided she would have nothing to lose by recklessly taking it a step further.

On the night the audience reacted warmly to the other artists during the first act but coldly to her. As she dressed for the mad scene she refused to put on the stage make-up, or straighten her hair or rumpled dress. "I went on stage in a desperate mood," she wrote in *My Life*, "too frantic to care how I looked, pale with grief and rage." She began to sing with abandon and tragic fervour and the audience responded with a palpable current of interest. At the act's close the audience burst into thunderous applause. "It was the greatest moment of my operatic career."<sup>3</sup>

Similar ovations were to greet Calvé's performances in the opera houses of Paris and London over the next two years. In New York during the 1893-94 season (after shocking many), she was proclaimed the pre-eminent exponent of the title role in Bizet's *Carmen*, and in the part of Santuzza in *Cavalleria Rusticana*. Calvé became the Metropolitan's female cult figure of the golden age, her fierce artistic integrity setting the benchmark of operatic realism for over a decade.

"Dear Calvé! What a divine woman!" the entrepreneur Henry Russell once recounted. "She was always in love with someone and, needless to say, someone was always in love with her ... one of the few great singers who had beauty, personal charm and a sense of humour."<sup>4</sup>

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3 Ibid.

4 Russell, Henry, *The Passing Show*, London, Thornton Butterworth, 1926.

## NEW DESTINATIONS

She sang her last *Carmen* (outside of France) in New York at Oscar Hammerstein's Manhattan Opera House in 1908. After each season she returned home to rest in her region of Aveyron where she had purchased a castle known as Cabrières. There she worked a farm, and, while keeping up practice on her own voice production, took in some pupils; and also provided a summer holiday for the waifs of Paris. "I am part of that earth," she wrote, "those rocky mountains, the burning southern sky. Elsewhere I am an exile."<sup>5</sup> This sentiment in no way curbed her quest for travel; she even chose as a title for the French-language edition of her memoirs: *Sous tous les ciels j'ai chanté* (Paris 1940). After visiting Turkey, Egypt and Greece she kept concert engagements in Cuba and in America, where she pointedly declined to discuss any romantic plans.

Early in March, 1910, Emma discreetly kept an appointment at Marseilles where, binding to secrecy two intimate friends chosen as witnesses, she married a handsome 29 year-old Florentine tenor named Galileo Aino Gasparri. <sup>6</sup> With Russian-born French-trained pianist Jacques Pintel they sailed on a P&O luxury liner for Australia, a land Emma had always longed to visit.

## AUSTRALIA

The R.M.S. Morea berthed at Port Melbourne around midnight on April 3, 1910. Waiting with motor cars to take Calvé and her party to the Grand Hotel in Spring Street (now the Windsor Hotel) were the tour managers J. & N. Tait. As Emma's trunks and crates were being unloaded one of the pieces was placed on the pier railing; just then a fast train arrived and demolished it. Emma, happy to be in Australia at last, put on a brave face, appearing to be in no way upset. Underneath she was saddened to see her expensive gowns and supply of perfumery destroyed, along with beauty preparations only procurable in Paris, but she resolved not to let this mishap spoil the joy of her arrival.

John Tait made mention of a public reception he would be arranging to welcome her to Melbourne. Before that occurred Calvé was honoured with a Town Hall civic reception.

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5 Calvé, Emma, op.cit.

6 *New York Times*, January 7, 1942.

"Oh, what wonderful air, what a glorious fresh, clean, sunshiny place is Australia," marvelled Emma lyrically in French during her first interview. "It is no wonder you have great singers. Your Melba has had a success here recently, I have heard. She is glorious — such a proud, cold beautiful voice." <sup>7</sup> When some bilingual Australians explained to her that Melba was not likely to be flattered by the description of her voice as translated, Calvé took pen in hand:

To the editor of the Argus,

Sir, — Will you kindly permit me to say the remarks concerning my dear friend Madame Melba's voice have not been quite clearly expressed in the English equivalent to the French. I wished to convey that Madame Melba was glorious; that she has a beautifully clear (not cold) voice, and proud because of its refinement. Madame Melba is, in a word, superb [sic]. Thanking you for your kindness, and with compliments,

Yours Emma Calvé  
Grand Hotel — April 6th

On Saturday, April 9, Emma, seeking an autumnal taste of the Australian bush, left town with friends to picnic at not too distant Ferntree Gully, then open countryside. A lover of nature, she expressed herself, half in English, half in French, delighted with the beauty of the fern bowers, tall gum trees and surrounding creeper-covered shrubbery. As she sipped a pannikin of billy tea brewed on a camp fire, a bird flew nearby, perched atop a tree, and began to laugh:

"Monsieur le Kookaburra est très joli," exclaimed Emma, clapping her hands with delight. "I must have him in my château."

She then lent her talent to the Australian bush call, "Coo-ee!" and listened for an echo. Wandering through scrub on an after-lunch stroll Emma came across the children of some newly-arrived settlers. Quickly making friends she was led by the hand back to their camp. People often found the childlike joy Calvé derived from interchanges with children, and other aspects of her unpredictable nature, both astonishing and endearing. Invited into the settler's tent Emma laughed, hugged, and kissed the children. Finally leaving them happy with sweets she rejoined her party. "I must have many more picnics in the bush," she informed them, "with billy tea in the company of Messieurs les Kookaburras." <sup>8</sup>

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7 *Argus*, Melbourne, April 5, 1910.

8 *Age*, Melbourne, April 11, 1910.

On Monday April 11, Georgette Petterson, musically-gifted wife of the Ormond professor (aka Director of the Melbourne University Conservatorium of Music) conducted her ladies' choir in a programme of welcome for Calvé at the Masonic Hall. Melbourne's Alliance Française (est. 1890) <sup>9</sup> claimed her attention the next night. And when the time duly came for Mr. Tait to escort her to the reception he had arranged, she was expecting around 200 people. To her alarm over 4,000 had gathered to greet her. <sup>10</sup> The enterprising manager had plastered the town with announcements a yard high:

**COME TO THE RECEPTION TO WELCOME THE GREAT SINGER  
EMMA CALVÉ  
JUST ARRIVED FROM EUROPE !**

Among the broader circle of music teachers eager for Calvé to succeed, and elevate by example local standards, was Elise Wiedermann, professor of voice at the city's second Conservatorium of Music — privately operated by the inspirational Professor Marshall-Hall since his controversial separation from Melbourne University in 1900. Mme Wiedermann, formerly an opera singer of note in Germany, had studied for some years with Mme Marchesi. Since arriving in Australia Elise kept up a warm and affectionate correspondence with Marchesi. It was from Elise's hand the young Nellie Armstrong née Mitchell had received the magical letter of introduction to Mme Marchesi in Paris that led to her debut in Brussels as Nellie Melba in 1887.

### **FIRST CONCERTS**

In the course of these half dozen receptions Emma contracted a sore throat but did not have the heart to postpone her first concert at the Melbourne Town Hall on Saturday April 16. Come the night, it established her as the finest singer to have visited Australia in many years — some with long memories said since Ilma di Murska, the noted Croatian soprano who, like Elise Wiedermann, had studied with Mme Marchesi in Vienna and later Paris.

Jacques Pintel (winner of the coveted Paris Conservatoire Premier Prix) entertained the audience with pianoforte solos, and Harold Whittle accompanied

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9 Thornton-Smith, C. B., "Paul Maistre, Vice-Consul and later consul for France in Victoria, 1886-1898, 1901-1908," in *Explorations* no 17, December, 1994 (issued October 1997), p.4.

10 Calvé, Emma, op. cit.

both singers while handsome young New Zealand protégé of Melba, John Amadio, played Calvé's flute obligatos.

"The day on which one first hears such a voice as Mme Calvé's," wrote the *Argus* critic, "deserves to be marked with a white stone ... The lower notes would make the fortune of any contralto. Rich, firm, full, and resonant ... (But) when she had given her marvellous interpretation of David's 'Air du Mysoli' ... it was impossible to think any soprano could have done it better; whilst her middle notes were again characterised by all the richness and satisfying character of the noblest mezzo ... "

"Signor Gasparri ... is one of the best tenors that has been heard here ... a voice of particularly pleasant quality, and he sings with delightful ease and fluency."

"Brilliant, audacious, original might sum up Calvé," began the *Age*, which continued its evocative description with:

She made her entry ... with a quick little run, waved her hands enthusiastically to the two thousand hearers ... and sang them into a state of warm admiration for her art, her beautiful voice and her unconventional way of doing things. She is wholly original, even to her dress, around which was flung in magnificent abandon a superb rose pink boa. She gesticulates, makes considerable use of facial expression, and is not afraid now and then to engage in a quasi dance or toss a flower to her audience. While differing in style to others we have known, she is nevertheless one of the most interesting figures in the musical world Australians have so far made acquaintance with. She turns the classic precincts of the concert room into a theatre, and that incurs censure from the purist. ... But all the same she does it so well and adds so immensely in the doing of it ... that only a churl would condemn her ... no easy thing to carry the traditions of the stage ... into the concert hall and score a success...

Calvé's voice may be described as of beautiful mezzo-soprano quality, particularly rich in overtones ... and finely produced. But this only represents a tithe of what she puts in to it, notably in songs of mood. The tones are more often than not, dark, sometimes sinister ... frequently a long passage is kept in one long streak of inky blackness, with the end flashed out in a dazzling point of iridescence. And now and again the tones become kaleidoscopic, by a clever use of the *messa di voce*, melting like

colours on a screen. If one may borrow a term of the painter's, it is distinctly a voice of the 'impressionist' order.

Her throat still sore, Calvé placed herself in the hands of a physician, and, on his orders, postponed her other performances pending full recovery. Next heard on Thursday, April 21, the *Argus* reported that "her wonderful singing last night so far eclipsed even her Saturday's performance that it became easier to credit the doctor's official bulletin."

The correspondent of Adelaide's *Register* reported on May 7 that "nothing so wonderful and witching as her impersonations had ever been seen or heard on the Melbourne platform before."

Not long into the Melbourne season critics and public alike had begun to echo the regret that it was not possible to experience Emma Calvé in a fully-staged opera. The more exciting features of her concerts being operatic arias from Massenet's works, or Gounod's *Sapho* or *Faust*, and the mad scene from Thomas's *Hamlet* etc. But the absolute highlights were the operatic duets which she and Galileo Gasparri included in the latter concerts. Of the first of these — being the Santuzza and Turiddu duet from *Cavalleria Rusticana* — the *Herald* noted:

Barely had the scene commenced when the conventional garb, the loss of decoration and footlights — all were forgotten in the face of the realistic drama ... no one could doubt but that a question of life and death was at issue ... in their expression of baulked passion they, however, at no moment violated the limits of an artistic performance ... Their two glorious voices held under perfect control, not for once deviated from their unison or magnificent sonority. As long as the scene lasted everyone remained spellbound. At its conclusion there was a scene of immense excitement ... (and) roars of applause.

## **OTHER STATES AND NEW ZEALAND**

After the sixth and last Melbourne concert the party headed north for Sydney. In their hotel suite she introduced to journalists her manager and Galileo — the latter not as her husband but her associate artist. Emma mentioned the extreme anxiety she had suffered just prior to her first Melbourne concert, and spoke of the satisfaction she experienced at the enthusiastic reception which followed. "Mr. Tait should explain," she suggested, "to what extent the vivid impression ... in the Santuzza scene was due to Signor Gasparri's beautiful tenor voice and

dramatic support." She then went on to extol his performances in Germany, Italy, and South America in *Tosca*, *La Bohème*, *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Pagliacci* (having studied with the respective composers); and to point out he had created the tenor part in Gabriel Dupont's melodious *Cabrera* at the Teatro Lyrico, Milan, in 1904.

A journalist guided the subject back to her, remarking that the musical dictionaries pronounce her to be the supreme Santuzza and Carmen. Calvé assumed an injured air:

"Oh, those Dictionaries of Mythology," she modestly sighed, surely they make me blush." <sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately Calvé's arrival in the harbour city coincided with a surge of heavy public melancholy and sorrow due to King Edward VII's reign being so suddenly terminated by death. After waiting so long to ascend the throne, it seemed to many that the pleasure loving Prince had brought with him into the new century a sense of moral liberation and informality. Calvé, like most of her operatic peers, enjoyed the patronage of the British Royal Family and had often sung at their command. The sad event cast Emma's mind back to a happy period when Queen Victoria commissioned a bust of her for the Waterloo Chamber at Windsor Castle. According to a member of the Royal staff Emma had been the Queen's favourite artist as she made her laugh. Calvé was the last singer the Queen had commanded to appear before her death. <sup>12</sup>

On every visit to London she had been invited to Windsor, where the Monarch would warmly greet her and converse in fluent French. On one such visit Calvé was engrossed in conversation with Princess Beatrice. Queen Victoria unexpectedly spoke to her, and, Calvé, somewhat confused, nervously addressed the Monarch as "Princess!"

Amused, Queen Victoria, responded in a bell-like voice, surprisingly young for her years, "Oh, Madame, you make me feel quite young again." <sup>13</sup>

Although the theatres remained open during the period of national mourning, Calvé felt the best tribute she could pay to Edward VII's memory was to cancel her opening concert (scheduled for Saturday, May 14) and those following, till after the King's funeral.

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11 *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 12, 1910.

12 *New York Times*, August 8, 1920.

13 *Argus*, Melbourne, April 5, 1910.

When, on May 24, she appeared at the Sydney Town Hall, an immense audience welcomed her, and she drew from the critics the usual praise for her striking individuality and vocal versatility. The *Sydney Morning Herald* stated:

Recognized all the world over as the greatest Carmen of the present generation ... it might have been supposed that Mme Calvé could hardly conquer in the colder atmosphere of the concert room. She has come here to show us that she can do so, and to prove that the fire of dramatic genius — when it really is genius — blazes fiercely under all circumstances. Moreover, as a singer also the term 'great artist' belongs to Calvé; not only by reason of a consummate technique ... but because of her feeling for music.

With the advent of the southern winter Emma fell ill and had to cancel her third concert. Her fourth and fifth drew an immense crowd. While hundreds still were being turned away from her sixth and last concert, J. & N. Tait announced that Calvé and her party would appear once more in Sydney in August.

If Calvé, interested as she was in the unusual, derived fulfilment singing and touring in Australia with the man she had recently wed, her satisfaction could hardly exceed the extent by which the public's expectations regarding her talent had been surpassed. There was only one thing more they desired of her. And that was to see her perform one of her now legendary roles; but this was not possible. So vast a continent, peopled only by four and a half million,<sup>14</sup> could not support a permanent, let alone multilingual, opera company. The best of the local operatic talent were currently engaged in presenting an English-language season of *La Bohème*, *Carmen*, *Cavalleria Rusticana* along with the Australian premiere of Puccini's latest work, *Madame Butterfly*.

But Emma had a compromise. From Sydney they returned south where she and Galileo went into rehearsal and prepared a programme of staged operatic excerpts — employing a few basic props, some scenery, and a hastily assembled orchestra.

Calvé opened her short Melbourne return season on Saturday, July 2 at the Princess Theatre. The first programme included scenes from Gounod's *Faust*, with a local bass named Schmied singing Méphistophélès. The *Australasian* esteemed the *Faust* finale to be, "the finest interpretation of the scene that has ever been heard in Melbourne." And the same journal considered her study of the *Hamlet* mad scene, given the following Wednesday, "a psychological masterpiece."

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14 The 1911 Census gave the Australian population as 4,445,005.

Next it was off to Brisbane, twice as far north as Sydney, for two concerts. But a cold troubled her again and she postponed the opening performance till July 9. Both concerts filled Her Majesty's Theatre from floor to ceiling.

From Brisbane the party travelled some 2,770 kilometres by rail to Adelaide to give two concerts, which won further acclaim, at the Jubilee Exhibition Building.

Following Adelaide the trio paid a return visit to Sydney for two more Town Hall appearances. Then on August 17 they sailed from Sydney to New Zealand. After opening in Auckland they combined music-giving with six weeks of sightseeing throughout the North and South Islands, giving in all ten concerts.

The party returned to Sydney in the spring and gave their farewell to that city at the Town Hall on October 1 — but not all of the Carmen section of the programme went as Calvé would have wished:

Nothing could exceed the seductive manner in which she lavished her wiles upon the soldier in the 'Habañera.' There was a contemptuous disregard of the conventions ... The aria was permeated with witcherie and diablerie, and irresistible. No José could have withstood such a Carmen for a moment ... The scene in the second act ... gave the other side. Her fierce rage was terrible to see, and she hurled chairs from the platform into the hall, dashed the sword and helmet to the floor, and upbraided her weak-minded lover.

Here the physical exertion loosened Emma's 'furbelows', and she urgently took pins from one part of her outfit to strategically secure a more essential part while struggling to keep the mood of the scene. But the makeshift repair failed and she had to redouble her efforts to avoid the indignity of losing more of her clothing. Suddenly seeing the funny side she burst into laughter:

Mme Calvé's merriment is highly infectious, and the audience joined in it, while Signor Gasparri manfully continued his protestation in the face of overwhelming odds as every embrace threatened to cause raiment disruption, and result in a figure, half Carmen, half Calvé ... every little move when Don José imperilled the situation afresh caused another outbreak. Gradually, however, there was a return to the seriousness of the play, and the duet was continued and finished with all the enchantment of an interpretation of the music stamped with genius. <sup>15</sup>

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15 *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 3, 1910.

Returning to Melbourne, Calvé chose to hold her last concert in Australia on Saturday, October 8, in the enormous Exhibition Building (erected in 1879-80 with David Mitchell, Melba's father, as chief contractor, for the Melbourne International Exhibition of 1880-81, it boasted a capacity of 10,000 people). *The Argus* recounted in part —

Signor Gasparri sang 'O Paradiso' ... very finely, and added one of his old successes, 'O Primavera' (Tirindelli) as an encore. Mme Calvé's appearance was the signal for long and loud applause, which was redoubled at the conclusion of her first song, 'Divinités du Styx.' She was in excellent voice, and her glorious voice filled the huge building without any apparent effort. Her encore was in some respects the finest thing she did during the concert; it was the 'Shepherd's Call,' and every note in it was a moment of sheer sensuous pleasure to the hearer. An absolutely perfect demonstration of voice production. It could not have been surpassed.

## DEPARTURE

Now, after five months, it was time to resume world travel. More adventures in music-making awaited her — for Calvé would have 12 years of concertizing ahead. Setting off from Australia the trio sailed to give concerts in Singapore and Ceylon.

And prior to undertaking the reverse journey homewards via Honolulu and America, Calvé was to tour India (in quest of spiritual enlightenment); then Burma, China and Japan. She would not return to France for an essential recreational sojourn amidst the familiar surroundings of Cabrières till the spring of 1911.

*Bryal Stewart*

## **SPECIAL FEDERATION ISSUE**

### **Explorations no 29**

There are additional copies available of Explorations no 29 (December 2000, issued in March 2001), a special Federation issue containing a major study by Ivan Barko of "French Perceptions of Australian Federation".

In view of the significance of the occasion and the importance of the topic, the Editorial Committee would like to give this issue the largest possible exposure and use it to recruit new subscribers and to increase the journal's distribution.

Members are invited to purchase additional copies of this issue for friends, acquaintances and associates who might become subscribers. The special price for additional copies is \$6.00, plus postage.

The Editorial Committee would also welcome suggestions regarding public libraries and other institutions to which copies of this issue might be sent with a view of interesting them in subscribing to Explorations.

The Index of nos 1 - 29 (1985 - 2000) will be enclosed with all additional copies of no 29.

The Editorial Committee

## **HAPPY AND GLORIOUS: FRENCH AT THE SYDNEY OLYMPICS**

The French are rightly proud of Pierre de Coubertin and his role in the founding of the modern Olympics, and the use of French as an official language of the Games is firmly established in the IOC Charter, as well as in international practice. It was therefore something of a surprise that in the lead-up to the Sydney Olympics we witnessed a brief flurry of awkwardness when the Governor General, Sir William Deane, announced that he had declined to use French for the opening ceremony of the Games.

There was no obligation for French to be used in this situation: the organisation of the opening ceremony depends on the local organising committee, and practice had varied considerably in previous Games. The original suggestion to the Governor General had come from SOCOG, and the press reported that the French Ambassador, Pierre Viaux, himself a former Olympic athlete, was offering his support for the idea. In the midst of these events came the public statement by prominent TV journalist, Mary Kostakidis, an accomplished speaker of French, that she certainly would not use French before English in her Olympic role: she believed that since Australia was an English-speaking nation, it was quite inappropriate to speak in French before English. Whether the Governor General was still wavering by that point, he was clearly caught in a difficult position, and the path of least resistance would have been to stick with English, which he did.

In the event, apparently troubled by feedback in his earphones, Sir William struggled a bit to get the magic sentence out, and perhaps it is as well that he did not have to repeat it in French. In the excitement and colour of the opening ceremony, however, this tiny hiccup was barely noticed. Nor was there any coverage of what happened to Mary Kostakidis in the wake of her declaration. She was in fact quietly replaced, as was inevitable. For although the press did not pick up the point, the fact was that her position had nothing to do with the opening ceremony. She had been offered the role of Master of Ceremonies for the general assembly of the International Olympic Committee — where the use of French before English is obligatory under the rules of the Olympic Charter.

This little eddy of linguistic conflict may have provoked some passing anxiety among the French, and indeed among those Australians who struggle against their country's monolingual currents. But as the opening ceremony showed, the French and English commentaries sat comfortably and smoothly beside each

other, as finely honed as the brilliant spectacle itself, an integral part of the dramatic build-up of an evening that culminated with the lighting of the cauldron. And if my memory serves me correctly, the French announcements preceded the English version — except at the moment when, after that beautifully paced and suspense-filled procession of women passing the torch gradually closer to the cauldron, it was finally revealed that Cathy Freeman was the chosen one. Did the English commentator jump the gun at that point, out of excitement or chauvinism? Or was the change of order pre-arranged? Or did I, being so moved by the whole sequence, and so proud to be part of the same community as those women, simply imagine that it was in English that I first learned about Cathy Freeman's special role?

By all reports, the overall use of French at and around the Sydney Games was greater than what had been the case at other recent Games. At all the sites, including the commercial areas and the restaurants, all signage, both internal and external, was bilingual, as were all written documents: the athletes' information packs, the brochures concerning the different sports, the daily news bulletin of the Olympic Village (which had a print-run of 15,000). In some places, such as Darling Harbour, where French-specialist events like judo and fencing were held, the visibility was even stronger (French is of course the official language of fencing). There were over 100 volunteer interpreters recruited by SOCOG for their expertise in French, whose job it was to support the various francophone delegations and press groups, and many hundreds of other volunteers whose knowledge of French was designed to ensure the widespread presence of the language throughout the period of the Games.

Such a level of francophone activity does not happen by chance. It was the result of long and careful preparation, and of extensive cooperation among members of SOCOG, the IOC, the French Embassy, and the Alliance Française. In the three years leading up to the Games, the Alliance provided intensive language training to hundreds of SOCOG agents, and hundreds of other volunteers. There was no evidence of any negative reaction, either in the streets of Sydney or in the press. No francophobic propaganda appeared as graffiti on the walls of the Homebush stadium, and no francophone athletes were threatened by mobs of angry anglophone monolinguals.

I was in Australia only for the opening and closing ceremonies of the Sydney Olympic Games. The rest of the time I spent with my wife in Paris, where the language of the Games was entirely French, and the view of events predictably gallo-centric. The word 'chauvinism' has its origins in France, and it is a characteristic that was every bit as apparent in the Paris media coverage of the

French performance as it was in the Australian media's coverage of our local heroes and heroines. But it was nice to note a theme of homage to Australia. There seemed to be real enthusiasm in the commentary on Cathy Freeman's gold medal, and, every morning during the two weeks of the Games, TV 5 ran a five-minute segment on aspects of Australian life, designed, directed and presented (in French) by a young Australian, Mat Campbell, who at the end of each show farewelled his audience with a winning smile and a 'See yer later'.

That French is an official language of the Olympic movement is one of the reasons adduced for its usefulness in those endless justifications that teachers of French are forced into. Although it is clearly a good reason, and although the experience of French in Australia during the Sydney Olympics can be rated as very positive, it is unlikely to have much effect on the longer-term teaching and learning of French language and culture in this country. It would require a complex and comprehensive investigation to find out whether the Olympic linguistic experience was in any way stimulating for the local education system, but my bet would be that its impact was negligible. By following the Olympic Games around the world, French helps maintain its profile as an international alternative to English, and that is an important background dimension for those who, in the Australian context, are engaged in promoting the value of learning other languages. But now that the Olympics are over, it is the local institutions that will, once again, take up the major part of that task, and especially the teachers in the schools and the universities. These groups receive invaluable support from France: the Alliance directors and their assistants, the linguistic attachés in the various State governments, and the scholarships and visitors' schemes provided through the Embassy, which also facilitates a vital French presence in the nation's great round of festivals. The list is considerable, and it has enabled the establishment of a very solid network in respect to which the Olympic Games will prove, I suspect, to have been fairly peripheral.

The network will need to develop urgent measures to compensate for the unfortunate (and in the view of this writer misguided) closure of the Melbourne Consulate, which for almost a century and a half has played a vital role, both material and symbolic, in the support of French. For the position of French in Australia, this event is more significant in the potential damage that it will provoke than any lasting benefits to be derived from the wide-spread use of French at the Olympics. The aggressive monolinguals are still out there in large numbers in the community, still asking the same questions that have been answered so many times, and still threatening the policies and practices that give French some protection in our education systems. In an exchange that took place in the Melbourne Age between Christmas and New Year 2000 (and that

was hence doubtless missed by many), the monolinguals and the defenders of foreign language learning had a minor skirmish. In the context of the Olympics, it is perhaps not insignificant that the letter that sparked the exchange was from a parent who was decrying the place of Languages Other Than English in his son's primary school curriculum, on the grounds that Physical Education was more important.

The Queen's English has now become the language of the Global Empire, long to reign over us. That is a given. But with a little care, we can continue to nurture linguistic and cultural spaces that are beyond the reach of the iron lung. Perhaps the most moving part of the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympics was the dimension given to the theme of reconciliation between Australia's indigenous peoples and its immigrant populations. In political terms, the road to reconciliation is long and difficult, but the Olympics showed that, as a community, we are capable of imagining it and imagining for it high-minded and original forms. It seems to me that there is congruence between this spirit of reconciliation and an Olympic movement that seeks to encourage a multitude of voices and the self-fulfilment of many peoples. French has a special stake in here, not so much because of the particular historical role of Pierre de Coubertin but because it has maintained itself internationally as an expression of freedom and pluralism.

*Colin Nettelbeck*

*The University of Melbourne*

NOTE : This article was to be published in Volume 29, December 2000.  
The Editors regret this delay, and apologize to Prof. Nettelbeck.