

COLETTE REDDIN 1920–2000

The death of Colette Reddin in November 2000 is not something that *Explorations* should leave without notice. Apart from the fact that she supported ISFAR and contributed more than one article to our magazine, she was a leading member of the French-Australian community in Melbourne for several decades and indeed in many ways the chief repository of its traditions and memories. In her case to use the cliché "the end of an era" is for once perfectly justified.

I cannot now remember exactly when I first met her. It was not in one of the various societies where Francophones and Francophiles gather. Apart from ISFAR with its research and documentary bent I do not normally frequent such bodies. Our acquaintance had, therefore, to stem from the fact that we lived in the same Armadale neighbourhood. The initial contact was made with my wife Joan, who was eventually on first-name terms with the person who remained "Miss Reddin" for me. Such formality over something like a quarter of a century is no doubt astonishing in these times, but I am old enough to think it normal. It did not prevent the sharing of ideas and reminiscences or the rendering of services (running errands and the like) made necessary by Colette's ill health in her last decade.

With her French-born mother from the Limousin she had moved to an apartment in the block they owned in Wattletree Road on the corner of The Terrace, and she stayed on there when she was left on her own. It was always felt, I suspect, as something of an exile from Toorak or South Yarra, where the family had lived earlier, but the flat remained an oasis of assured good taste in an area that is not immune from *parvenu* excesses and glossy minimalism. Her parents belonged to that interesting group of couples formed from marriages between Australian soldiers and Frenchwomen at the end of the First World War. Colette, an only child, lived in France for a number of years before the Reddins settled definitively in the Melbourne where her father had a secure social position. Schooling at Sacré Cœur and St Catherine's was followed by work as a journalist at *Table Talk* and Radio Australia amongst others. By the time I met her she was essentially looking after her mother and much involved in the voluntary activities, notably for French and cultural causes, that were an important part of her life for many years.

Having two allegiances, both of them real and solid, is not always easy. The years 1940–1944, about which Colette Reddin was

quite discreet, posed special problems for French-Australian families and caused tensions paralleled in some ways by some of the sillier manifestations of opposition to nuclear testing in the Pacific in more recent decades. However, Colette was successful in both her French and Australian roles. She was a tireless supporter of and worker for the Alliance Française and the Maison de France, whose fund she inaugurated, as well as being a volunteer guide at the National Gallery of Victoria from 1968. The French Government at least recognized her services by the award of the rank of Chevalier in the Ordre National du Mérite. On the Australian side there was nothing official, yet she was an informed and effective witness to truths about local culture and society that are too often concealed. To those inclined to claim that all things of value began in 1933 or 1938 or 1947 she could quote chapter and verse, backing them up from the magnificent set of scrapbooks she bequeathed to the State Library of Victoria, where they are now in the Australian Manuscripts Collection.

Much of the flavour of Colette Reddin's discernment and gift for friendship is contained in the book she wrote, published and efficiently distributed in 1987-1988: *Rupert Bunny Himself. His Final Years in Melbourne*. It is her monument and a testimony to the sense of distinction that could, and perhaps still can, be nurtured in Melbourne.

W. K.

An obituary compiled by Colette Reddin's cousin Keith Bullen and her friend Fay Gerber appeared in *The Age* on 17 May 2001.