

DEATH OF A BOOKSELLER

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It is the fate of most booksellers to live and die in relative obscurity. They are often remembered with warmth and affection by their customers, for whom they provide not only needed articles of merchandise, but also special places for intellectual, literary and even political socializing. However, the public record can be quite sparse. A case in point is William Ellis Bird (1867?-1927). His work *Zapataland*¹ did not qualify him for inclusion in Morris Miller's *Australian Literature from its Beginnings to 1935* or in the John Arnold and John Hay *Bibliography of Australian Literature*.² It does appear as "Fiction" (a political judgment?) in Frederick Macartney's revision and extension of the purely literary part of Morris Miller.³ Biographical reference works treat Bird more or less as a footnote to the story of his wife, who maintained their business during the long years of her widowhood. Thus it is she who appears in *The Early Australian Booksellers: The Australian Booksellers Association Memorial Book of Fellowship*⁴ and in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.⁵ Forty years ago nostalgia for "Mrs Bird's" was still evident among Melbourne collectors, who saw her modest prices for secondhand and antiquarian books as a benchmark. That this irritated younger members of the trade, only too aware of changing conditions here and overseas, goes without saying. John Sendy's chapter on "Ellis Bird's Bookshop"⁶ seems to be alone in doing some justice to the husband as well as to the wife.

For the public at large Ellis Bird probably achieved most notoriety in the manner of his death: on 23 September 1927 he fell and hit his head in a tram safety zone in Collins Street, and he expired three days later in the Melbourne Hospital. The event was recorded in the *Argus* on two occasions, apart from the normal death and funeral notices.⁷ However, it was the inquest report carried in the *Age* on 29 October of the same year⁸ and partially reproduced by John Sendy⁹ that provides *Exploration's* reason for interest in the affair. (Perhaps distracted by the Squizzy Taylor - Snowy Cutmore shoot-out on 27 October, the *Argus* did not notice the inquest.) The *Age* report is headed:

A COLLINS-ST. FATALITY.

Three Consuls in Car.

The major witnesses were, in fact, the Italian, American and French consuls, who were travelling in a car in Collins Street driven by the first-named, Antonio Grossardi. The report on the inquest reproduces, from the evidence given by Grossardi and the American Consul-General Arthur Garrels, a more succinct version of the statement collected by the police on 27 September.¹⁰

Antonio Grossardi's account makes it clear that Garrels and the French Consul, René Turck, were to be members of a party he was entertaining at the Melbourne Club. We need not be astonished at this fraternization of diplomatic representatives. Melbourne was a cosy world, far from the tensions of the Northern Hemisphere.

René Turck's name is not unknown to readers of *Explorations* since he was mentioned in Colin Nettelbeck's interview with J. G. Cornell¹¹ and in Colette Reddin's additional notes on personalities of the 1920s and 1930s.¹² To situate someone who was clearly not unworthy of representing France in Melbourne when this city was still the Federal capital it is helpful to look at the summary of his career given in the most recent of the diplomatic and consular annuals that came to Monash University Library from the archives of the pre-1940 mission:

TURCK (*René-Antoine*) [O. +], né le 20 août 1877; licencié en droit; élève breveté de l'École des langues orientales vivantes (grec moderne et roumain); diplômé de l'École des sciences politiques; élève vice-consul surnuméraire à la Division des Fonds, 16 juin 1904; attaché payé, 1^{er} juin 1906; élève vice-consul à Cardiff, 19 décembre 1907; gérant du vice-consulat de Newport, 26 juin–22 juillet 1908; vice-consul de 3^e classe, 30 juillet 1909; chargé de la chancellerie à la Nouvelle-Orléans (non installé), 7 mars 1912; à Cardiff, 8 octobre 1912; consul suppléant de 1^{re} classe, 15 mai 1919; chargé du vice-consulat de Melbourne, 14 juin 1919; chargé du consulat, 15 novembre 1920; officier d'académie, 12 janvier 1921; consul de 2^e classe, 3 novembre 1924; chevalier de la Légion d'honneur, 23 juillet 1925; à Athènes, 1^{er} décembre 1929; consul de 1^{re} classe, 5 mars 1931; chargé du consulat général de Montréal, 10 mai 1933; gérant de la légation d'Ottawa, 16 septembre–6 octobre 1934; à nouveau, 25 septembre 1935–12 janvier 1936; consul général, 16 novembre 1935; officier de la Légion d'honneur, 7 août 1936.¹³

Apart from noting that he was over fifty before serving briefly in a country—Greece—whose language he had studied formally, one can wonder about the special place of Cardiff in the differing career paths of consuls who served in Australia.¹⁴ Beyond this it is clear that Turck deserves to have one day a thorough biographical memoir. The same is, of course, true of Ellis Bird.

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Notes

1. *Zapataland: a Rebel Communist State in Present-day Mexico Republic*, Melbourne, Andrade's, 1919.
2. *A-E* volume, Kew, Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2001.
3. *Australian Literature: a Bibliography to 1938 by E. Morris Miller Extended to 1950*, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1956, p. 62.
4. Sydney, The Australian Booksellers Association, 1980, p. 79.
5. Volume 13: *1940–1980 A–De*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1993, pp. 183–184.
6. *Melbourne's Radical Bookshops: History, People, Appreciation*, Melbourne, International Bookshop Pty Ltd, 1983, pp. 80–87.
7. *Argus*, 24 September 1927, p. 34e and 28 September, p. 18h; 27 September, p. 1a (death notice) and 28 September, p. 1b (funeral notice).
8. P. 15a.
9. P. 83.
10. See Public Record Office Victoria VPRS 24/P, unit 1123, file 1927/1324. I am grateful to Meredith Sherlock for drawing my attention to this document, which was the starting point for the present brief article.
11. See n° 12, June 1992, p. 11.
12. See n° 13, December 1992, pp. 16–17.
13. *Annuaire diplomatique et consulaire de la République française pour 1937*, nouvelle série - tome XLVIII, soixante-quatorzième année, Paris, Imprimerie nationale, 1937, p. 356.
14. For Turck and, much later, for Marcel Chicoteau (see *Bibliographia et obiter dicta*, Brisbane, 1990, p. [v]) it was a first foreign posting. For Paul Maistre, on the other hand, it was a punishment after his falling out with Dejardin and his first recall from Melbourne.