

BOOK REVIEWS

Sarah Turnbull, *Almost French: A New Life in Paris*, Sydney, Bantam Books, 2002, 309 pp., paperback \$22.95. ISBN 1 86325 285 1.

In the early 1990s, twenty-seven-year-old SBS journalist Sarah Turnbull met a handsome Frenchman named Frédéric Venière in Bucharest. Some months later, anxious yet beguiled, she visited Frédéric in Paris. A love affair blossomed which would eventually lead to marriage. This book is Turnbull's eight-year tale of intercultural exploration and rapprochement. It is in great part told in the present tense with intelligence and humour.

Aside from the difficulty of overcoming the limitations of her schoolgirl French (such that she could swear with proficiency), the central axis of this book is the personal tension generated by Turnbull's encounter with seemingly stereotypical French formality, elitism, intellectual smugness and bureaucracy. It is both a critical and an endearing account. Yes, we meet a good many pompous snobs and implacable conservatives, but Turnbull can see through the chinks in the linguistic and cultural armour of the French and reveal warmth and tolerance—be it a starched general at the *Ecole militaire*, famous couturiers, gastronomes or enterprising peasants. This will come as little surprise to anyone who has lived in France for any length of time. Of course, tolerance cuts both ways and Turnbull, the informal *Australienne*, is not ashamed to recount her own naïveté, unwitting breaches of taboo and self-discovery. Her battles and mistakes, elegantly recounted, are often cringingly hilarious. This is engaging autobiographical writing, rich in charming word pictures.

Towards the end of her book, after discussing racism and contrasting the inherent fluidity of Australian multiculturalism with French perceptions of their culture as established and requiring protection from foreign influence, Turnbull writes:

I've come to the conclusion that the French are no more racist than any other people. Perhaps they're just more upfront about it because there's no culture of political correctness in this country [France]. Besides, it's also true that the French—far more readily than Australians—will take to the streets in defence of principles, like the massive demonstrations that occurred in Paris when the previous government tried to introduce a system of "dobbing" in illegal foreigners. This heightened sense of responsibility stems partly from a heritage of defending human rights which dates back to the French Revolution. So the reality in France is multi-layered. Yes, I've heard many racial slurs here. Yet when Gallic

cultivation is mixed with kindness and curiosity, the result is an enlightened worldview and an uncommon openness.

While those who know France may well agree with this observation, they will nevertheless find this book very impressionistic, with many sweeping generalizations. Turnbull's thematic chapters (on fashion, food and dogs etc.) do not always hang together coherently. And some of her concluding remarks on French optimism and economic recovery now seem dated and subjectively based on the spent euphoria of the World Cup victory in 1998. Despite these criticisms, I found this book an enjoyable and easy read which generated a great deal of personal nostalgia!

Edward Duyker

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Victor Barker, ed., *Paris Studio: Contemporary Writing by Fourteen Australian Authors who Lived, for a While, in Paris*, Rushcutters Bay, N.S.W., Halstead Press, 2001, 176 pp., illustrated by Fred Cress, \$28.95. ISBN 1 875684 78 6.

In 1947, Félix Brunau (inspector-general of public buildings and national palaces) was sent on a mission to South America and Scandinavia. He returned home convinced of the urgent need to assist foreign artists who wished to visit France during the difficult post-war period of reconstruction and shortages. With the aid of Paul Léon and the Finnish painter Eero Snellman, he persuaded the City of Paris to make available a 15,000 square metre site for an international artists' studio in the historic Marais district on the right bank of the Seine. The French Government also made available 2,000,000 francs credited from its budget for the fine arts and ultimately exempted the foundation from taxes. It was some years before architectural heritage and design issues were surmounted. (Some local artists even voiced opposition to the prospect of assistance to competing foreign artists!)

Construction of the Cité internationale des Arts began in 1962. In July 1965, five painters and two musicians arrived. One was the Australian pianist Stephen McIntyre; he is now Associate Professor of Music at the University of Melbourne. Six months later 136 studios were occupied by artists from 37 different countries. An auditorium and exhibition room were constructed in 1969. An engravers' studio was opened in 1970 and a TV room and other buildings followed. There are now some 300 studios in the complex at the disposal of a host of foreign governments and organizations, but also the City of Paris, the French Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. My own sojourn at the Cité, in the first quarter of 2003,

was one of the highlights of my life. It was with great interest, therefore, that I read *Paris Studio*.

The fourteen contributors to this anthology were all Australian residents of the Cité's Keesing Studio, endowed by the late Nancy Keesing in 1986. Their writing, in the form of poetry and prose, is not in chronological order: indeed, the penultimate chapter by Robert Carter, the first Keesing Studio resident, recounts events that occurred while Gough Whitlam was still Ambassador to UNESCO. Brian Castro, who had taught in a French *lycée* twenty-five years before, searches for a sense of belonging and "home" in his impressive essay "The Persistence of Memory". Amirah Inglis also does battle with memory, to reassert Jewish family and political bonds in Paris in her excellent contribution "Searching for Uncle Henri". The collection includes some fine Paris-inspired verse by Jean Kent and Gary Catalano. Perhaps the most philosophically engaging chapter is Robyn Ferrell's essay "Paris Does Not Exist". Four of the chapters are by the editor Victor Barker and he does not disappoint with his beautifully written reminiscences. Félix Brunau's widow, Simone, is a pervasive figure in many of the essays. She is still intimately involved in the running of the Cité and makes a point of having a personal meeting with every resident. (I remember an engaging discussion with her about Teillhard de Chardin, André Malraux, Aimé Césaire and the looming Gulf War; we talked for over an hour and picked up the same philosophical threads again shortly before I left Paris.) Familiar Australophiles are captured on these pages too: Barker is dazzled by translator Martine Marin, with eyes "like those black buttons that soft cuddly toys used to have"; and Tony Maniatty drives down the Boulevard Montparnasse with frenetic Jean-Paul Delamotte talking non-stop about Australian literature. This is a very enjoyable collection of essays by some of Australia's finest writers. It deserves a wide readership.

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Marc Serge Rivière, ed., *Daisy in Exile: The Diary of an Australian Schoolgirl in France (1887-1889)*, Canberra, National Library of Australia, 2003, 189 pp., illustrations, appendices, \$29.95. ISBN 0642197645.

Margaret Isabel "Daisy" White had just turned four when she lost her mother in childbirth in April 1875. Two years later, her father Henry Charles White (1837-1905), a wealthy grazier, remarried. Daisy adored her

father, but had more difficult relations with her new stepmother, a mere fourteen years her senior. A decade later she was effectively sent into polite exile as a student at "Les Ruches", an expensive boarding school for girls at Fontainebleau. Although the journal of her voyage to France has disappeared, her diary from 10 September 1887 to 1 August 1889 is now preserved in the manuscript collection of the National Library in Canberra.

Professor Rivière has done a fine job bringing this intimate record to publication. Daisy was an engaging writer—something which may have been in her blood, for she was the first cousin (once removed) of future Nobel laureate Patrick White. A surprisingly mature young woman, Daisy was a keen observer, passionate about art, literature and history, spirited and prepared to defend her rights. Clearly she was both excited by her life in France and resentful of her separation from her family, friends and country. Although she embraced the linguistic regime at Les Ruches with enthusiasm and had little patience for the frivolous American students "talking gossip (in English, or rather American) and sniggling idiotically at each other's sallies of wit" (p. 164), she kept her diary in English, albeit studded with Gallicisms and sometimes whole sentences in French. Her chronicle of daily life at the school is pleasantly absorbing; yet, to my mind, Daisy is at her best when recounting her excursions beyond Fontainebleau. Her final diary entry (on 11 August 1889), however, leaves little doubt as to where her heart really lay: "When I go home I'll ride about with Father, and look after the station. It's a man's work, and will rest me from all the French finnikineries that one has to put up with here." (p. 175)

Professor Rivière has put considerable effort into his thoughtful introduction, epilogue, annotations and appendices. They place Daisy's writings in historical and literary context. They also engender a sense of pathos, for no one can read this vibrant account and not feel sorrow knowing that such a talented, independent spirit died at the age of just 32 in 1903. *Daisy in Exile* is illustrated with an excellent selection of historic postcards and other images. Daisy's own photographic portrait—with her knowing eyes and Mona Lisa smile—is a hauntingly appropriate choice for the cover. This is another beautifully produced book from the National Library of Australia. My only complaint is the lack of an index.

Margaret Allen, *Catherine Martin's Library, with a List of the Books*, Canberra, Mulini Press, 2002, [vi]-60 pp., paperback. ISBN 0949910-94-5.

Some readers of *Explorations* will be aware that Victor Crittenden, the owner and founder of Mulini Press, took over *Margin*, the little magazine devoted to Australian literature and history founded by our late colleague Dennis Davison. Crittenden's energy—on the eve of his eightieth birthday—is by no means limited to this. Margaret Allen's monograph is the twelfth in a series entitled "Bibliographica Historica Australiae". (The fourteenth, published in late 2004, will be noticed by *Explorations* in due course.) In this way a number of important topics in the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Australian publishing, bookselling and library history are being documented and opened out for the benefit of a growing community of people interested in these aspects of our past.

Margaret Allen's subject, Catherine Martin née Mackay (1847–1937), has herself achieved a good deal more prominence in recent decades. In particular Rosemary Campbell (formerly Foxton) has produced critical editions of two of Martin's novels: *The Silent Sea* (Sydney, University of New South Wales Press, 1995, n° 4 in "The Colonial Texts Series") and *An Australian Girl* (St Lucia, Queensland, University of Queensland Press, 2002, in "The Academy Editions of Australian Literature"). The latter includes (pp. 639–655) a "Biographical Background" written by Margaret Allen herself.

Catherine Edith Macauley Mackay was born on the Isle of Skye and emigrated with her family to South Australia in 1855. She belonged to a group that has tended to be systematically ignored by the champions of an Australian multiculturalism alleged to have begun somewhere around the middle of the twentieth century. In fact the multilingual character of the British Isles and of their Celtic fringe was transplanted to the Australian colonies from the very beginning and remained influential throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. Alongside the substantial input from Continental Europe and elsewhere it was part of the diverse cultural and intellectual landscape of a country that cannot be dismissed as narrowly Anglophone. Catherine Mackay quickly profited from some of the other traditions, not least from the German Lutheran one she encountered in Mount Gambier. Thus the poetry she had printed in South Australian or Melbourne newspapers during the 1870s included translations from German (see "Publications of Catherine Martin", *An Australian Girl*, pp. 656–658). Indeed after the First World War she protested about the fate of the German

books held in the Mount Gambier Institute (see *The Silent Sea*, pp. xvii, xxxvi). In her youth French was also part of her reading, as witness a translation from Lamartine that appeared in the *South Australian Chronicle and Weekly Mail* in 1875. From the mid-1880s onwards she spent long periods in Europe with or without her husband Frederick Martin, who died in 1909. Quite unusually for someone of a Scottish crofting background she ended up a genuine cosmopolitan.

Family members in South Australia retained part of Catherine Martin's library. These volumes are the basis of Margaret Allen's study, which makes due allowance for what has been lost and for what was read in libraries on both sides of the world. The French material is quite surprising, since it includes, along with more predictable items, Marinetti's *Mafarka* (Paris, E. Sansot & Cie, 1910) and tome IV of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1923 printing). In some ways Martin—without a tertiary-education background—seems to have been at least as open to new literature as Christopher Brennan and others of the next generation.

There is, in the volume, uncertain handling of French accents, and one is entitled to be disappointed at the number of literals and typos. Despite these blemishes this is an interesting contribution to Australian cultural history. Margaret Allen's conclusion that "it was indeed possible to be both colonial and well-read" (p. 31) is borne out by the evidence presented.

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