

# ISFAR: A RECOLLECTION

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In 1984, the question of French–Australian relations was very much in the air. Anny Stuer had published her seminal volume on the French in Australia, the Alliance Française of Melbourne had organized a significant exhibition on the French presence in Victoria, and the University of New South Wales had published an important survey of French–Australian cultural connections. It was in this context (and, I must confess, somewhat in order to make sure that the Victorian scene should have its deserved place in the national activity) that the process began of imagining a French–Australian study centre.

It was Dennis Davison (a man of great experience in such things) who had the idea of founding a little magazine, and Wal Kirsop accepted the role of editor. We worked together on the initial meeting—held at Monash University on 31 May and 1 June 1985—under the title “France–Victoria Connection”. And so it was that the first number of *Explorations* preceded the first activity of what was to become the Institute for the Study of French–Australian Relations.

The name ISFAR came out of a Monash University bureaucratic necessity. I was convinced that for the association to have a firm basis it needed an institutional home, and at Monash—where I was ensconced at the time—the word “centre”, which I would have preferred, had strict definitions. “Institute” fell outside the constraints. I would have preferred “centre” because it gives a better idea of what I hoped for the association in question: something that could gather (within the security of an institutional university setting) the many threads of interest in relations between Australia and France—across the state, across time, and across different disciplines. That these relations were important was for me axiomatic, and while I now understand that the case has to be argued I remain persuaded that the arguments are compelling.

Monash University, via the Arts Faculty board, gave ISFAR the right to exist on 11 September 1985. The governing statutes were published in number 4 of *Explorations* in March 1987. They were grandiose in their aims, carefully broad in the definition of their administration and function, and painstakingly detailed and quaint as far as the meeting and finance protocols were concerned. Fortunately, those articles of association were overtaken by the incorporation of ISFAR a few years down the track. Under the original articles, I had the designation of “director”, as no doubt befits

something that so resoundingly calls itself an institute. However, then, as now, the reality of those involved was much less pretentious. These were people, both within and outside the university world, who were, and have remained, committed to furthering research in a diversity of areas of French–Australian relations. For me, there are many memorable highlights: various congenial social occasions, enthusiastic committee meetings, participation in the organization of conferences, and so on. One truly exciting moment was the episode of the “Consul’s Treasure”, which had a number of us elbow-deep in the dust of ancient and miraculously preserved tea chests, delving into valuable historical documents that had been diverted in our direction for a very limited period of time (for those unfamiliar with the mystery, it has been recounted in *Explorations*, 8, 1987).

ISFAR publications, both *Explorations* and the various volumes the institute has helped to create, continue to make an important contribution to our understanding of this nation’s links with France. They are a notable addition to Australian historiography, and now that ISFAR is really the only organization of its kind in Australia I would expect this aspect of its activities to become increasingly important.

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